

# HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

## 1. The Escape

Harry slunk warily along the footpath, his head slightly bowed, eye's darting up and down the street, glancing every now and then left and right. His right hand hovered over the pocket in his worn out faded jeans where his wand lay hidden, but within easy grasp. His fist was unconsciously clenching and unclenching. Most people would have found the misty cool night air soothing, pleasant, but Harry was on edge.

As he rounded the corner of Privet Drive, he stopped. His head turned to survey the street before him. There was nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew someone was there, somewhere, lurking in the darkest corners, or hidden by magic. He could feel their presence as sure as he knew he was standing there himself. He waited for someone to show. He never knew who it would be, but he could predict their appearance down to the last second. He stood for a moment, almost overwhelmed by his impatience. It had been the same every night ever since he had been at his Aunt and Uncles. And tonight, as before, a figure gradually emerged from the nothingness.

Harry was able to make out the features as it made it's way towards him. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt. After scanning the area as soon as he had seen Harry, Kingsley had removed his invisibility cloak and given Harry a quick nod in greeting. When they were within a few feet of each other, Harry spoke.

'What's happening? Who's here with you?' His voice was calm, but his look was determined. 'Goldstein is at the other end of the street' Kingsley said in his deep voice 'But he'll be replaced by Tonks at midnight. I'm on until dawn.' Even as he spoke, he never stopped surveying the area. 'Nothing to report?'

This is how the quick exchanges between Harry and his guard had gone every night. 'No, nothing.' Harry's eye's barely met Kingsley's as he looked down at his shuffling feet. 'So ... when am I getting out of here?'

'Nothing yet I'm afraid.' Kingsley was used to Harry's impatience, he had stood guard five out of the eight nights since Harry had returned to Privet Drive. 'Give it a bit of time,' he said 'things are not as ... easy ... as they were. It's going to take a fair bit of organizing. As it is Podmore has to leave early ...' he brushed his hand over his bald head 'so I'm going to be hear alone for about half an hour.'

Harry looked up suddenly, and then looked back at the ground just as quickly, his eyes seeming to be searching for something. This was it! He thought. This was what he'd been waiting for. It was only a short amount of time, he would have to cut it close, but he knew he could do it. With one guard gone, he could slip through.

'Is there any other news?' Harry always dreaded asking this, but he had to know. If he was going to go through with his plan, he had to learn everything he could about what The Order knew. There was silence as Harry waited, eyes still lingering on the ground. He was sure if Kingsley caught his eye, he would see the guilt Harry tried so hard to conceal. Kingsley cleared his throat. 'Some of the usual stuff.' he said, though he seemed hesitant. 'A few more missing people ... they found Fudge's body late last night.'

Harry looked away in disgust. Fudge hadn't been his favourite person in the world. When Harry had returned from the graveyard, clutching Cedric Diggory's dead body during the Triwizard Tournament over two years ago, Fudge had refused to believe that Voldemort had taken form again. And in the year following, he had gone to great lengths to discredit Harry in every way possible, squashing most of Dumbledore's efforts to get people to believe in Harry and to prepare for Lord Voldemort's return. But for all Fudge's faults, he did not deserve the hand that fate had dealt him.

Harry took a deep breath and turned back to Kingsley. Somehow this news had given him the push he needed. He now held such resolve that he was right in his plans, that he could look Shacklebolt directly in the eyes.

'What are Voldemort and his Death Eaters up to? They must have a plan! You must know something from following the trail of blood they leave behind.' Harry said this with such loathing that Kingsley barely grimaced at the mention of the name Voldemort, but pulled back slightly from Harry, seemingly more uncomfortable with his tone.

'We don't know ... exactly.' Kingsley said evasively. This was the final straw for Harry, he could tell Kingsley was reluctant to say too much, and finally the pressure of the past eight days, sitting uselessly in his room at the Dursleys waiting for news, biding his time unable to rest as he waited for his chance, suddenly burst to the surface.

'If you think' he said gravely 'that Dumbledore didn't know I was ready for this,' his eyes blazed threateningly 'then you've already lost to Voldemort!' his body was rigid with frustration.

Kingsley seemed exceedingly uncomfortable, but Harry didn't care. If he was going to get out of Privet Drive tonight and take on the task Dumbledore had left him to do, then he needed information, and he needed it now. Harry had no intention of going after Voldemort yet. He had to find and destroy all of the Horcruxes, the artefacts that contained the pieces of Voldemort's shattered soul, before he could do that. No, he needed information so he could avoid detection. If he was going to do this, he was going to have to do it alone, and the last thing he needed was for Voldemort to find out what he was up to. With the exception of Ron and Hermione, no one would know where he was, not the Order, not Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ... not even Ginny.

'Look,' Kingsley said, he was fidgeting with the invisibility cloak hanging fluidly in his left hand. 'I don't know what good it will do you to know too much right now anyway. You-you can't leave until you turn seventeen in a few weeks, it's safer that way. You will be better protected here than anywhere else until then, now that Dumble...' he trailed off with an awkward hand gesture. 'Well ... you know what I mean.' He gave Harry a steady look, 'It's what he would have wanted.'

Harry let out a heavy sigh and his body slackened slightly. He knew he could not tell Kingsley why Dumbledore would have understood, he could not tell him about the Horcruxes, about Dumbledore's dying wish, so he resigned himself to returning to No 4, where he would sit and wait, now his chance had come. Harry turned to leave, hunched over, defeated, and had only gone a few paces when Kingsley called after him.

'See you same time tomorrow night, then.'

Harry turned slowly and looked at Kingsley 'Yeah,' he said quietly 'I'll be here.' A sinking feeling crept over Harry as he turned his back on Kingsley. Would he ever see him again? Would he ever see any of them again? He straightened himself to his full height and resumed his state of readiness as he moved quietly back up Privet Drive.

He knew what he had to do, the path lay before him, and he would walk that path alone, as he had done many times before.

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Harry could see the dim glow of light seeping through the small gaps in the curtains as he reached No.4. Someone was still awake. Harry crept up to the house and with great care, turned the handle and pushed the door open as quietly as possible, unwilling to give his Uncle yet another opportunity to start ranting at him, a favourite past time of his.

It seems the Dursleys had decided the best way to repay Harry for inflicting Dumbledore on them last summer, was to make his life with them even harder for him than before. He suspected that it had a lot to do with Dumbledore's comment about their beloved, and hopelessly spoiled dope of a son Dudley, who in their eyes was a perfect angel who could do no wrong.

He stepped over the threshold then eased the door back into place and released the handle, but no sooner had he turned to mount the stairs when he saw his Uncle's stocky figure standing in the doorway to the kitchen, arms crossed over his rounded stomach. His eye's glittered dangerously, as he glared at Harry, a smug satisfaction etched on his face. He had obviously known Harry had snuck

out, and had been waiting there for him, ready to catch him. Harry had the impression of being like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

'I knew you were up to something!' his uncle said in quiet triumph 'I said to Petunia you had been sneaking around, and now ...' his eyes narrowed 'now I've got you!' his barely suppressed glee at springing Harry was turning his face purple. 'Where have you been boy?' he demanded 'Out terrorizing the neighbours? Prowling around the streets, causing trouble no doubt!'

Harry thought this was a bit rich.

His cousin Dudley was the biggest thug in the neighbourhood, yet somehow his Aunt and Uncle had always managed to explain away his behaviour as 'boisterous youth' or 'having a bit of roguish fun'. But Harry knew the truth; Dudley was a prat.

Uncle Vernon's eyebrow arched high on his forehead as he approached him, his arm raised and his finger jutting accusingly at Harry. 'OUT WITH IT!' he yelled sharply 'Where have you been going every night?'

Harry was mildly astonished that his Uncle was even interested enough in his activities to realize he had been disappearing off on a regular basis.

A trickle of playful wickedness ran through him.

'I've been reporting to my guard, actually.' Harry said casually, watching for his Uncle's reaction. A deep sense of satisfaction filled Harry as he saw his uncle falter immediately, his face slackening.

Uncle Vernon choked out the word 'G-Guard?'

'Yes,' said Harry 'that's right ...' He paused for effect, his Uncle's eyes grew wide with uncertainty 'Guard.' Harry finally confirmed 'they're posted just down the street, been there ever since I got back from school. You've met some of them before ... at the station.'

Uncle Vernon looked like he had been hit with a Silencio charm. His lips were trying to form words but no sound was coming out. Harry was enjoying himself immensely. He knew his uncle would not have forgotten his encounter with the formidable figure of Mad-eye Moody a year ago. Harry added with a measured tinge of exasperation 'They insist I keep them updated with how things are while I'm here.' He sighed dramatically. 'They're quite overprotective really...'

His Uncle's lips suddenly fused together, Harry could tell he had not been able to find a single retort. He was looking everywhere else but at Harry, his arms dangling by his sides as he shifted his weight uncomfortably. He finally cleared his throat.

'You'd best get to bed.' He mumbled without looking at Harry and then he turned and disappeared into the kitchen without a word, Harry smirking after him.

Strictly speaking, everything Harry said was perfectly true, so he felt no guilt what so ever that he had unhinged his Uncle. After all, it was only the fact that the Dursleys were so unkind to him that gave them cause to worry about his "guard" in the first place.

He headed to his room and sat on the end of his bed, Hedwig hooted softly at him from her perch atop the cupboard. He looked up at her and smiled. She was the one thing that made being at the Dursleys bearable.

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Harry had been planning this night since he had arrived back at the Dursleys, and now that his chance had come he felt a surge of adrenalin pulse through him. He had some last minute tasks to do before midnight came, but almost everything he would need, lay in a state of readiness.

Mad-eye Moody had been his main obstacle, his magical eye saw right through almost everything, including invisibility cloaks, and Harry felt sure Moody could see through the walls into his very room at times, and on the nights Mad-eye took guard duty, he was quite certain he would not have

been able to slip by him.

Tonight however, Moody was not going to be a problem, and with only Kingsley on for maybe thirty minutes, he had his chance. Harry knew the guard changed at midnight and he glanced at the digital clock by his bed. 10.35pm, that would give him about an hour before he was to leave Privet Drive, forever.

Harry drew in a deep breath as he leapt to his feet. Taking out some parchment and ink from his desk draw, he sat down and started to write. As the quill scrawled across the page, Hedwig twittered in anticipation, keen to be put to use again. She had gone out only once in the past eight days, and that was to deliver a short, hastily written note to Ron that contained nothing of interest. It was not safe to pass information by owl.

Ron would be back at The Burrow, trying to learn anything he could by stealthily listening in on his father and Bill.

On the train back from Hogwarts Harry, Ron and Hermione had sat in a compartment they kept to themselves, conceiving various tactical ways of gathering information while Ron and Hermione were at The Burrow. Hermione had arranged to stay after spending only a week with her family. They occasionally looked up when interrupted by Order members who were patrolling the train, or fellow students like Neville who wandered in. But they were, for the most part, left alone. The loss of Professor Dumbledore had imparted a sombre mood upon the Hogwarts Express.

Every time the compartment door had slid open, Harry expected - hoped, to see Ginny's face; he sat through the train journey back to London feeling like part of him was missing. It was the beginning of the end of what had been for Harry the most wonderfully comforting thing he had ever known. His heart would have liked nothing more than to have Ginny sat beside him; the smell of her hair drifting lazily in the air and the comforting warmth of her body leaned against his. But he knew she could not be with him, he had made that choice. She understood he had to leave her behind. She understood he must face this challenge without her. She understood.

Harry looked at the message he had just finished writing, it was as bland as the one he had sent Ron, but it's purpose was far more important. He was rolling it up and sealing it when Hedwig fluttered down from her perch and landed on the desk in front of him. She held out her leg expectantly. Harry smiled at her affectionately and scratched her neck 'I'm not sending it yet.'

She nibbled at his finger a little too vigorously and Harry pulled it away 'Ow!' he breathed laughing softly, rubbing the red marks that she had left. She flapped her wings huffily and retreated to her cage for a drink. 'You'll just have to be patient, it wont be long.' He laid the scroll on his bed and reached for a knapsack. He had discovered it while searching one of the closets in his room days before; it had been bought for Dudley to take on a camping trip the Dursleys embarked on many summers ago. It had lain discarded and forgotten ever since.

Harry bent down and lifted the loose floorboard under his bed. There lay a reasonable store of provisions that he had managed to collect. He had been sneaking around the house in the gloom of night using his invisibility cloak. His Aunt Petunia put the missing food down to Dudley's inability to stick to his diet; his cousin had frequently left traces of midnight binging strewn from one end of the kitchen to the other.

One night, because of Dudley's voracious appetite, Harry had almost been sprung.

While heading up to his room after having just raided the pantry for supplies, Harry met Dudley coming in the opposite direction. He had snuck out of his own room and was descending the stairs, heading straight for Harry who was concealed under his cloak. The sheer size of Dudley meant there wasn't enough room for them to pass one another without Harry making significant contact with him. Harry was holding some packets of instant porridge, dried peas and some tinned fruit in his arms, and in his scramble to back down the stairs, he dropped a tin of apricot halves. It fell with a loud clunk, and then to his dismay, continued to roll down the stairs, Harry's feet dodging it, as he backed down the steps in an effort to get out of the way of Dudley.

*Thunk ... thunk ... thunk* was all his startled cousin heard on the stairway below him. Dudley could see neither Harry, nor the tin of apricot halves still hidden under the cloak.

When Harry and the tin came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, he looked up and saw in the gloomy light from the street lamp outside, the look of sheer terror on his cousins bloodless, white face. Dudley's lower lip wobbled uncontrollably as he turned, stumbling over himself in his rush to get back to his room, inaudible squeaks escaping him as he heaved his weight against the door and slammed it shut.

He did not venture out in the small hours of the morning again, which turned out to be very convenient for Harry indeed.

Harry shoved some clothing and a bottle of water on top of the food he retrieved from the cavity, and then packed several other items carefully in the outside pockets of the pack. It was now heavily bulging as it lay on the bed. He reached in the closet for his broom, and placed it beside the scroll. He took out the invisibility cloak from his trunk and placed it over the back of the chair, and then lastly he packed his trunk with everything else he owned. It took him some time to check and double check that he had packed everything; he could not afford to leave anything behind this time as he had no intention of ever returning.

Hedwig had been watching him from her cage, her head swivelling this way and that as she followed him round the room. She let out a small screech as Harry sat down at the desk to write one last note.

*Aunt Petunia,*

*I want to thank you, for you have done more than you know.*

*Because of you my mother did not die in vain.*

*Harry*

He placed the parchment squarely in the centre of the desk, stood back and looked to Hedwig. 'Okay,' he said quietly raising his arm 'come here.' She fluttered down and settled onto Harry's outstretched arm. 'I need you to go to the park and wait for me there Hedwig.' He said 'Do you understand?' She hooted softly and launched herself out of the window into the night.

Harry locked his trunk, flung the pack on his back, grasped his broom and swung his invisibility cloak over him.

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Harry entered the park, tense and alert. He hadn't needed to pass Shackbolt because he was posted at the opposite end of the street, but he was half expecting Tonks to come materializing out of thin air on top of him, so he quickened his pace as soon as he left the path to number four. The bulk of his pack and the awkwardness of his broom made it difficult to stay completely concealed under his cloak, but his need for urgency was overtaking his need for care as he scuffled along under his cloak.

Harry eyes were constantly on the move, searching for anything out of the ordinary, though he suspected he was safe for the time being. The Order of the Phoenix would not be looking for someone leaving the Dursley's; they were primarily there to stop anything getting in.

The street lamps glowing dully in the mist cast eerie sprawling shadows across the lonesome grass of the unwelcoming night time park. Hedwig was perched on top of the swings, her large eyes looking straight at Harry. She had extremely good eyesight at night, and had no doubt seen a part of Harry's foot or broom poking carelessly from under his invisibility cloak. He stopped in the shadow of the large, dense oak tree and removed the cloak, stuffing it into his jacket. Hedwig plopped down in front of him silently and he bent down to tie the scroll to her leg.

'Take this to Hagrid' he said breathlessly 'Don't stop for anything, Okay?' She trilled lightly and took off in a silent feathery swoop. Harry mounted his Firebolt and sped off after her, into the night.

With any luck The Order wouldn't discover his absence until the following night when he failed to make his nightly report. There was a possibility that Moody would take a shift before then and discover him gone, but Harry had at least twelve hours under his belt in that event. It was the best he could hope for. A pang of guilt stabbed at him as he tilted his head into the wind, he knew The Order would be thrown into a state of uproar when they found out, he could picture Lupin's reaction when the news got back to Headquarters.

Over the past few weeks Lupin had reluctantly tried to fill Dumbledore's shoes and Harry had noticed the strain in his face when his ex-Professor had pulled him aside on the Hogwarts Express to give him instructions for the summer. Lupin would be racked with guilt and worry when he heard, but Harry could think of no other way to do what he knew he must.

The wind bit through his jacket as he soared over the hills below. Hedwig was an incredible flyer, and although Harry had no trouble keeping up with her on his Firebolt, he couldn't help but marvel at her skill and determination as he tailed her.

Things would have been much easier if he was seventeen and confident with his disapparating, he could have apparated near his destination and been there in an instant. But using magic while he was sixteen at The Dursleys would have brought the ministry down on him immediately, which also would have alerted The Order, and Harry needed time if this was to work.

Harry was chilled to the bone by the time he started the descent. He had been successfully led to Hogwarts by Hedwig who was heading straight for the newly restored Hagrid's hut, but Harry could not risk flying over the castle walls, unsure of the enchantments they held, so he landed near the edge of the Dark Forest and pulled his cloak back on.

The absence of the brightly lit castle torches which normally sent light streaming out of the windows, made Hogwarts appear far less welcoming than Harry remembered, and it seemed to him that the castle itself was lamenting Dumbledores passing.

When he finally rapped on Hagrid's door, Harry heard Fang launch into a zealous round of barking, followed by the muffled sound of something breaking within. Hagrid opened the door only inches, his beetle like eyes staring suspiciously through the gap.

'Who's there?' he grunted

Harry lifted the front of his cloak so only Hagrid would see him, he had not seen anyone else around, but it was best to be cautious.

'It's me.' He said in a half whisper, 'Can I come in?'

'Oh, It's you.' Hagrid relaxed for a moment, but as he opened the door to let Harry pass he suddenly tensed again. 'Wait a minute! Wha the 'ell are you doin here?'

'Ssh!' said Harry impatiently as he removed his cloak, placed his broom against the inside wall and proceeded to close all the curtains in the cabin. Hagrid had locked the door and was standing with his arms on his hips, a look of annoyance plastered across his face.

'Yeh not s'pose to be here!' he exclaimed, more quietly this time but his anger still evident. 'Yer s'pose to be home where yer safe!'

Harry's message lay opened on the table near Hedwig who was pecking at a dish of food. He gave her head an affectionate rub then pulled off his pack and threw it in a corner, planting himself on one of the huge wooden chairs by the table.

'I need your help.' He said, as he looked Hagrid squarely in the eyes. 'There's something I've got to do, something that I cant do alone. But it's very important, and I need your help.'

'What are yeh talking about? Yeh cant jus walz in here with plans to do something that'll mor'an likely put yeh in danger again. Yeh can't jus go sneakin off like that!' Hagrid waved his arms pointedly at Harry. He was intensely irritated and if Harry hadn't known him as well as he did, he might have feared him right now.

'I had no choice,' Harry's eyes dropped to the ground and he added quietly 'There was no other way.'

'I'm a member of The Order, I am!' said Hagrid indignantly. 'Wha are they gonna think when they discover yer gone, eh?' Harry felt awful, but he needed to make Hagrid understand, so he looked up again.

'Hagrid, please listen to me ... this is really important ... just hear me out. You know I wouldn't have come unless there was no other way.' And because he didn't know what else to say, 'Please Hagrid ... trust me.'

Hagrid heard the plea behind Harry's voice and his look of anger had gradually turned to one of concern. He seemed to be going through some sort of internal struggle as he moved over to the sink and scooped up the broken pieces of a cup.

'Don't know what good it'll do yeh.' He dumped them in a bin and looked over at Harry 'I've half a mind to send a message 'n let 'em, know where yeh are right now!' He turned his full attention on Harry who sat slumped in the oversized chair. Hagrid puffed out his chest 'Not promisin nothin mind,' he said 'but if yeh got somethin to say, I'll hear yeh out.'

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'I need you to take me to Godric's Hollow. I want you to show me where my parents were murdered.'

Harry watched Hagrid where he stood, and for a moment he wavered, the thought struck him that Hagrid would never agree to this. Hagrid's eyes closed for a fraction of a moment as he sighed heavily, then he pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Harry, he was looking intently at the tabletop as if searching for the right words.

'I knew yeh'd wan teh go there one day. Bin expectin it for a while,' Harry had imagined all sorts of reactions from Hagrid, but not this. Hagrid finally met Harry's eyes 'ever since yeh returned from the graveyard, in fact. But it's not somethin' yeh should be thinkin 'bout doin right now.' Hagrid's eyes swelled with tears and he looked away again 'Not now tha Dumbledores gone. It's not safe Harry, it's the sorta place they'd be waitin fer yeh teh turn up.'

'I have to go Hagrid, I have to know what happened.' Harry was trying to catch Hagrid's eye. 'I need to see where it all started.' Hagrid was listening to Harry as though he knew exactly what he was going to say before he said it. 'I need to see what's left behind.' Harry added quietly. Hagrid frowned as he looked back at him.

'What d'yeh mean, left behind?'

Harry was trying to read the look on Hagrid's face in an effort to decide what he should say next. 'What's left of my parents house?'

'It's jus as it was the night it happened. The place was pretty much destroyed after Sirius returned and tha Pettigrew blew up the street. There wern't much left, but nob'dy was allowed teh go near it after that, tell yer the truth, nob'dy much wanted to either.'

'So, no ones been through it since Voldemort was there? No one at all?' Harry asked.

'Dumbledore wen there teh put a block on it. Magic teh stop curious folk from wanderin in there. Guess he thought it might be dangerous still, or maybe he thought it was a fittin memorial, I don't know, but like I says 'Arry, it's not the sorta place yeh wanna be rushin off to now.'

Harry sighed and looked away. 'I have to go, it's something I've got to do.' He was talking more to himself as he studied Hedwig, but then he looked back to Hagrid 'And I'll go with or without your help, if I have to.'

Hagrid was slowly shaking his head, his eyes on the table again 'Yer goin to stay here until The Order come and get yer, I cant let yeh do it Harry, I'm sorry. I understand why yeh wanna go, but it's not safe, I'll send 'em a message 'n let 'em know yer here-' He started to rise from his chair, but Harry leapt to his feet and had his wand out so fast that Hagrid stopped, one arm still resting on the

table, eyeing the slightly shaking wand now aimed at him.

'I'm going Hagrid, one way or another.' Harry's voice was shaking but he was determined to see this through. Hagrid drew himself to his full height as Harry gulped before adding, 'You can either help me, or step aside'

Hagrid did not seem perturbed by Harry's wand; on the contrary, he was looking at Harry with what looked like pity. They stood across the table from one another for a time, neither speaking, but a change was gradually overcoming Hagrid.

'Firs'tly, I know yeh wont use that thing on me so yeh migh as well put it away, and secondly' Hagrid reached into a cupboard and pulled out a plate of rock cakes 'Better have somethin to eat, it's a way teh the Hollow and we don't know how long we'll be gone.'

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A short time later the two of them were hurrying across the grounds, the sun was almost up and Harry, hidden under his cloak, was having a job to keep up with Hagrid's gigantic strides. When they arrived at a battered old wooden shed near the greenhouses, Hagrid pulled out a key ring that jangled loudly with what must have been over a hundred keys, all of different shapes and sizes. He fumbled through them for a moment then seemed to find the one he was looking for. As the old door swung open they entered into complete darkness, Harry took out his wand and lifted the cloak.

*'Lumos'*

There were no windows and the atmosphere in the shed was thick and dusty as if it hadn't been opened in years. There was an assortment of odd wooden carvings scattered across the workbench and unusual leather straps dangled here and there from the ceiling. There were several rusty old cages of different sizes and strengths stacked against the walls, and in the very back corner stood a large dark motorcycle.

Hagrid grabbed a scrap of cloth and brushed the seat, a cloud of dust and grit filled the air and Harry spluttered, waving his hand around trying to disperse it.

'The last trip this bike did was teh take you from yer parents house to your Aunt and Uncles.' Hagrid looked down at Harry 'and now sixteen years on, it's goin to take yeh back to the beginning again,' Hagrid raised his eyebrows dubiously 'if we can get it goin o'course!'

'This is Sirius's bike?' Harry looked at it as a pang shot through him.

'Yup! Kept it here all these years. Don't have much use for it meself, don't go anywhere I might need it. Still ere it is!' Hagrid patted it fondly. 'You know, come teh think of it, it'd be your bike now.' He leaned over it and winked at Harry, 'You want teh drive it?'

'No!' Harry said quickly, 'I mean, I don't have a license.'

'Well, yer in good company then,' Hagrid smiled. 'Nor do I!'

Minutes later the bike was rumbling loudly and Harry scooted onto it's back behind Hagrid.

'Nox' he said as he replaced his wand, careful to tuck his cloak around himself, keeping his feet well hidden. The biked jerked suddenly, then rolled out into the early dawn rays, Harry grasping the pillion bar tightly.

'Yer alright Harry?' Hagrid asked over his shoulder.

'Yeah.'

Hagrid weaved between the greenhouses and headed towards the gate, once through he turned the bike South and accelerated. Harry felt the front wheel lift and a moment later the rear left the ground as well and they were ascending rapidly as Hagrid steered them over the forest.

They sailed along at a great height for what seemed like hours to Harry, it was almost impossible to talk to Hagrid over the sound of the wind and the grumbling engine, so his thoughts strayed to other people and places.



He had told Ron and Hermione of his plans to return to Godric's Hollow so he knew they would be expecting this, and he had sworn them to secrecy, so when they were questioned by Mr. Weasley, (as he knew they would be) they would put on a plausible act of innocence while denying any knowledge of his whereabouts.

Ginny, on the other hand had no idea, though because she was always quick on the uptake, Harry suspected she would know he was up to something by Ron and Hermione's reactions. It made him feel better knowing that she was smart enough to figure out when something was really wrong, and he was reassured by the thoughts of seeing her again when the wedding came. He knew he would not be able to touch her, or seek the solace he had found in her arms, but he would look upon her again and that would be enough.

The sun was high in the sky when they started their descent, and it wasn't long before Hagrid had found a suitable place to land; a clearing near the edge of a pine forest. They walked some miles to the edge of town, Harry looking about him from under his invisibility cloak. As the houses became more frequent and shops started to spring up, Harry began to notice things about the town that were remarkably familiar.

## **2. Back To The Beginning**

The streets began to fill with people the closer they were to the centre of town, and Hagrid was attracting a variety of looks from the passers-by, not the least being a sort of stunned gaze that followed him as they were unable to stop themselves from turning their heads as they gaped after his enormous bulk. But Hagrid lumbered along the footpath, bending very low every now and then to avoid hitting his head on a shop awning, Harry alongside him under his cloak.

Some pedestrians automatically gave Hagrid a wide berth, even taking the trouble to cross the street before continuing on their way, however there were one or two very old people who merely looked slightly surprised when they noticed him, and went back to chatting to who ever they were with, or scanning the shop windows with great interest.

Godric's Hollow was the greenest and prettiest place Harry had ever seen. He had noticed on the walk in, the grassy fields had seemed particularly lush, and the trees almost too tall, as if every living thing was thriving. Closer to town every nook and cranny was filled with the richest lush foliage or peppered with an array of dazzling colourful flowers. Even the people looked unusually healthy and bright.

You couldn't have asked for a cleaner looking hub, and although many of the buildings were obviously very old, they were lovingly looked after, none of the flaking paintwork or cracked bricks that you might ordinarily expect. It was almost as if the buildings were in some sort of time warp while everything else carried on around them. But it wasn't just the beauty of this town that caught Harry's eye.

The "Welcome To Godric's Hollow" sign was the first hint of what lay in wait. It was in the form of a shield, painted richly in red and gold, with the formidable Gryffindor Lion rearing up on hind legs, mouth open and teeth bared in mid roar with its claws out stretched. 'Population – 2297' it said in Gold Lettering across the bottom. Over some of the oldest buildings, moulded into the keystone brick that was common in the archways was the distinctive mark of the lion once more, some had abandoned the red and gold colour scheme, but many were very much still icons of Gryffindor. Small bronze lions were mounted atop railing ends and the shield was repeated several times throughout the streets signs.

In the very centre of town was a marble statue, it would have been close to 15 feet in height and was surrounded by a garden bed of vibrant red and golden-yellow flowers. The bearded man stood proud and tall, wearing what could have been a travelling cloak, and a hat with a wide brim, which tapered up to a point that sagged gently to one side. His left arm was held aloft, his hand cupped loosely as if holding something of great importance, his right hand rested on a the hilt of a sword, the tip of the blade on the ground. Harry did not need to look at the plaque at the base of the

statue to know that this was Godric Gryffindor,

As they neared it Hagrid spoke 'Guess yeh know who tha is.' Nodding at the impressive stone figure.

'Yeah,' said Harry as he looked around him to make sure no one was close. 'This was a wizard town once, wasn't it.'

'Yep! Long time ago though, bin muggles here for centuries now, but there are still wizards here n'all.' Hagrid said looking about him 'It's them that looks after the town mostly, they keeps it true.' 'True?'

'Don't know if yeh noticed but things don't exactly age here like they do elsewhere.' Hagrid looked at the statue of Godric and added 'He was a very powerful wizard by all accounts, set up all sorts of enchantments on the area teh keep it from gettin spoiled. He wanted to make sure it would remain true to Gryffindor here long after he'd gone. His family lived here fer generations, buildin it up, kept the enchantments goin. Mostly older wizards here now though, they stay in memory of 'im.' Hagrid put a hand up to his eyes and looked into the sun hovering in the sky. 'It's goin teh be dark in a couple of hours so we'd better get a move on.'

Harry turned away from the marble man and followed Hagrid down the road, winding further and further through the quaint older style houses. As the sun dipped lower the buildings glowed and shadows crept across the road. The landscape took on an almost surreal appearance but the beauty of it was all but wasted on Harry. He was aware of only one thing. He was almost at the place where Voldemort had destroyed his family.

When they rounded Achilles Lane the change in their surroundings was instant. Instead of the delicate garden beds and cosy cottages they had just passed, the houses lay abandoned, distinctly grey in appearance and lacking any trace of warmth or homeliness. The occasional For Sale sign was stuck in an overgrown garden and there was neither light nor sound coming from any of the windows.

Then suddenly, there it was.

Harry looked out on the devastation before him and he knew he had arrived. Hagrid stopped in front of the ruin and cleared his throat. He looked to where he thought Harry ought to be, but said nothing.

Harry removed his cloak and stared out at the scene, a stony look on his face. There was a corner section of a room with part of the ceiling still attached, jutting out of piles of rubble, the only trace that a house once stood there. He gazed at it for a moment, unaware of his cloak sliding from his slackening grip to the ground.

He started to move slowly towards the ruin, not thinking about the block Dumbledore had placed on it, not thinking that at any moment he would be repelled backwards. One foot in front of the other as if in a trance, he made his way to where it had all began. He could vaguely hear Hagrid's voice behind him but he could not stop himself, he stepped beyond the tiny white gate and amongst the broken bricks.

He made his way to the partially standing room, scanning the wreckage as he went, unsure of what he was looking for, every now and then something caught his eye, but when he bent to investigate it was pieces of broken glass glittering in the light, or fragments of plaster and wallpaper. He stopped before the wall and looked up at the sagging ceiling, then beyond to the sky. He didn't have much time before sunset, so he closed himself to everything but the task at hand.

'Harry!' he looked over to where Hagrid was yelling to him from outside the gate. 'Harry, I think yeh should come back, I can't get past the block!' Hagrid looked as if he were pressed against a pane of glass. His cheek and lips were distorted as he pushed himself into the invisible barrier, straining to get through.

As Harry watched, it struck him that Dumbledore had protected this site from everyone entering, except him. Either Dumbledore knew Harry would want to come back or he was intending to bring him here himself.

'It's Okay, Hagrid.' He said loudly 'don't worry ... I think Dumbledore wanted me to come back here.' He looked around him 'It'll be dark soon anyway... just wait for me ... I won't be long.'

Hagrid stopped struggling and sat on the low rock wall on the street, 'Jus hurry up.' He said 'Don't wanna be here longer than we have to be.' Then added 'What yeh looking fer anyway?'

'I don't know,' answered Harry feeling his way along the wall 'I don't know.' He added quietly under his breath as he bent down to sift through the rubble.

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The sun had disappeared behind the trees at the end of the street long ago; the moon shed only the dimmest of light. Harry's hands were scratched and bleeding in places and his clothes were covered in powder from the bricks and plaster, but the only things he found were useless broken pieces of metal and other building materials.

After a long while he sat himself down on a chunk of wood, looking over at Hagrid who was still sitting on the wall, though he was slumped and looked as if he might be asleep. Harry put his elbows on his knees, and lowering his head, he brushed his hands through his hair, breathing heavily.

*Nothing. Not a single thing left!* Harry felt frustrated and disappointed. He was sure there would have been something of them here, a small trinket, a picture, clothes, anything! He rubbed his face trying to quash the emptiness that was growing inside him, shuddering as the cold night air penetrated him. How could he have been so stupid, dragging Hagrid all this way for nothing? He was feeling worse by the second and emptiness seemed to consume him as he pulled his cloak around him. It was as if a cold, dead claw had wrapped itself around Harry's heart - squeezing the hope and light from it. A soft mist was gently emerging from his mouth.

The whole thing had been pointless.

All hope left him.

His darkness felt complete.

With a sudden realization, Harry jerked his head up. He leapt from his squatting position and pulled out his wand. With lightning speed, he scrambled towards Hagrid, desperately searching the dark skies above him as his heart caved in fear.

'Hagrid!' he yelled 'HAGRID!' he heard Hagrid snort as he stirred 'HAGRID!' But before Harry could reach him a mass of floating black cloaks were closing in on Hagrid from all sides.

Knowing what to do, Harry reached inside and pulled a day spent with Ginny down by the lake to his thoughts. '*Expecto Patronum!*' Harry yelled as the memory flooded him, his arm outstretched and his wand gripped tightly. A perfect, giant silver stag leapt from the end of his wand and rushed at the Dementors. It raced towards them with its head down, antlers forward, but as it hit the magical block that Hagrid had been unable to get through it dissolved into nothing.

Harry was struggling over the debris trying desperately to reach Hagrid who was flailing his umbrella around hopelessly.

'*Expecto Patronum!*' Once again the stag erupted from Harry's wand and rushed at the Dementors, and again it dissipated when it hit the block. Hagrid let out an awful moan as he dropped to the ground.

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Harry flung himself over the gate.

'*Expecto Patronum!*' His heartbeat raced as the great silver stag burst forth and charged. This time it made contact and ploughed through Dementor after Dementor.

'TO HAGRID!' Harry yelled, pointing urgently at the enormous motionless figure sprawled on the ground. 'Get them away from him!' Harry was rushing up behind his patronus as it cleared the way and now that he was out of the magical block, he could hear the dreadful hollow sucking breaths the bony, cloaked figures emitted. Dementors seemed to just keep coming, closing ranks behind Harry and the stag as they reached Hagrid.

'Keep them back!' Harry yelled over his shoulder as he crouched down over Hagrid gripping the front of his coat, shaking him 'Hagrid! *Hagrid!*' Hagrid moaned and strained to open his eyes.

'Get back ... behind ... the block ... Harry!' he breathed, barely conscious. Harry looked up and saw the stag running in a circle around them, only just managing to keep the shadowy figures at bay. Dementors were pressing in on them relentlessly and Harry knew they could not be held off forever by his patronus. There were too many of them.

Hagrid was trying to raise his head up but lacked the strength, his eyes were only half open as he looked out at the flowing black cloaks and his body trembled from the icy coldness the Dementors inflicted.

'Get ... back' he was struggling to talk 'behind ... the block'

'It's alright ... it's okay ...' Harry was saying to Hagrid 'They can't get to us.' But he looked back out at the hooded figures swarming all around them. It was only a matter of time before his patronus would fade then they would be sitting ducks, he wouldn't even have enough time to conjure another one before they swooped in on them. He looked down at Hagrid.

'Harry ... get ... back -'

'I'm not leaving you Hagrid!' Harry cut in abruptly, then more softly he added 'stop trying to talk.' His mind raced, he had no idea how he was going to do it, but he was not going to let Hagrid have his soul sucked out by a Dementor; he was going to get them both out of there.

*CRACK!*

All of a sudden, several loud popping noises sounded beyond the black swirling dome that enclosed them. Harry's stomach lurched as a feeling of dread flooded him. *Death Eaters!*

He heard loud voices but couldn't make out what they were saying. He closed his eyes. *I should never have come. I should never have persuaded Hagrid to come. He trusted me!* He opened his eyes again and stood up. A new strength took hold and any fear abandoned him as he set himself to defend his friend with his last breath.

It appeared the Dementors were being called off so the Death Eaters could take over, the ones on the outer edge were falling away rapidly and it wouldn't be long before Harry would be face to face with Voldemort's cronies, or maybe even Lord Voldemort himself.

For a moment it seemed the Dementors had been caught by surprise, they jerked suddenly, like swarming fish avoiding circling sharks, turning their backs on Harry, and then a change came over them. They scattered, some darting away up into the sky while others appeared to be dropping away, as if knocked down. A gap opened up before him and Harry realized what was happening.

A large silver animal, a goat patronus was charging down Dementors with ease, and to Harry's left and right he caught sight of more silver patronuses, one that looked like a large wild cat, the other an enormous vulture, all of them clearing the way as three very old wizards in white robes, two with long silvery beards and the other almost completely hairless, rushed up to where Harry stood over Hagrid.

'Are you ... alright?' the skinny bearded one panted breathlessly, bent over clutching his knees.

'I'm fine, but they attacked Hagrid before I could get to him.' Harry watched the other two wizards recall their patronuses now that the last of the Dementors had gone, Harry's stag turned to him but

faded into the darkness as it approached his outstretched hand, finally at the end of it's power. The biting cold eased to a mild calm night once more.

He turned back to Hagrid and crouching over him said 'It's alright Hagrid, they're gone now.' Hagrid was beginning to recover, his giant blood providing far more resilience to the Dementors than ordinary people. Harry looked over his shoulder 'Don't suppose you have some chocolate handy?'

'What was ... all that ... about?' Wheezed the dumpy bearded wizard in a grainy voice, looking at Harry. Slowly comprehension dawned on his face; he had probably recognized Harry from his photo in the paper. Harry doubted his scar was visible in the dim light.

'You!' he breathed 'Wha ... what are you doin here?' his eyes wide, but even before Harry had a chance to answer the little bald wizard cut in.

'Now why would ya be needin to ask a question like that for, Fudd?' he had a look of exasperation on his face as he threw his arm in the direction of Harry's parents house.

'Eh?' Fudd said screwing his face up and cupping his hand behind one ear 'Whadya say?' 'Look where we bleedin well are, for goodness sake!' the other wizard answered loudly 'Whadya think he's doin here? On 'oliday doin a bit a sightseein?' he said gruffly and rolled his eyes 'Dodderly old bludger.' He added not too quietly.

'I 'eard that.' Said Fudd.

'Oh, so ya heard that alright!' said the second man giving Fudd a sideways glance.

'Eh ... what?' the plump man was making it obvious he was having trouble hearing again. 'What was that?'

'Never mind!' the bald man said loudly in frustration.

'I do not think it is wise to stand here bickering amongst ourselves.' Interrupted the thin bearded wizard, his voice was old and cracked but firm 'We had best leave here as soon as possible.' He gave the other two wizards a silencing look. 'They may very well return and in even greater numbers. Mr. Potter, you and your friend will come with us for now,' he said motioning the others to help get Hagrid to his feet. 'You can go no further tonight, I think'

Harry helped rouse Hagrid who stumbled to his feet, listing to the side. He was grey behind his bushy beard and looked very weak so Harry did his best to help support him. It was backbreaking work as they walked back down the street, but Hagrid was slowly regaining his composure and easing Harry's burden as they went.

'Who are you?' Harry asked.

'We must make haste,' the old wizard glanced at Harry 'there will be time for introductions later.'

Harry could see the wizards face in the street lamp as they passed, he looked incredibly old; his face was full of lines and his hair was ghostly white, he was glancing about him as he moved down the street and like the others was still brandishing a wand.

They hurried along a tree lined avenue where the dwellings were made from large grey stone bricks and were spaced well apart, all had sweeping lawns that surrounded regal looking buildings and as they neared a large gold iron gate they drew to a halt.

There was no house here that Harry could see, it looked more like a park of some sorts, though it was definitely private going by the enormous walls on either side of the entrance that blocked it from view. The ghostly wizard motioned to Harry and Hagrid so they leant in.

*'Gryffindor's Seventh on Hollow.'* he whispered.

From out of nowhere an enormous stone mansion began to expand before their eyes, nudging aside giant old knarley trees and small flowering shrubs. Harry had experienced this once before when he had been taken to Gimmauld Place, Sirius's family home. It, like this place, was a protected site, unplottable and unknown by any who were not given the address by the secret keeper.

Hagrid started at the sight before him and the old man smiled faintly 'Dandelion.' he said. The gates

parted and as they approached the large stone manor, Harry noticed an ornate Gryffindor emblem upon the enormous oaken doors. The building itself was rather plain and unassuming, something the other houses along this road were not.

'You get the door, Waldo' said Fudd loudly as he and Harry struggled to keep Hagrid from swaying on his unsteady feet. The little bald wizard muttered something under his breath and ran the tip of his wand lightly along the crack where the double doors joined in the middle of the two massive cast iron handles shaped like lions. There were several loud clunks and the doors swung slowly inwards, creaking loudly as Harry guided Hagrid through the entrance.

'This way,' said the thin bearded man, motioning his hand as he entered a small room just off the entry. Hagrid dropped onto a bench seat that lay beneath the main window and Harry sat himself down on the arm of a leather chair nearby, surveying the scene.

The room had a distinctly cosy feel to it. Harry gave an involuntary shudder, his brush with the Dementors sat in stark contrast to the welcoming surroundings he now found himself in. A crackling fire blazed in an old blackened stone fireplace on the far wall, casting warm flecks of orange light around the room and the circular iron chandelier that hung from the high ceiling was laden with burning candles illuminating the furnishings which appeared as old as the wizards who now sat in them.

'Oi ... Sooty!' Waldo said suddenly, his eyes searching the air around him. A second later a small figure appeared in middle of the room, it was immediately recognizable as a house elf, but it appeared to be much younger than the house elves Harry had seen, its skin was uncharacteristically wrinkle free.

It had large grey eyes and a small nose that looked like an unripe strawberry, it was wearing a red and gold kilt that hung from its chest and was fidgeting where it stood.

It realized after an exasperated look from Waldo that it had materialized on top of the coffee table and it let out an apologetic oops! Before jumping down onto the rug.

'Yes ... er ... sir?' It squeaked anxiously.

'Right,' said Waldo shifting in his chair 'bring some tea for our guests ... and chocolate ... and don't forget the sugar pot this time...' and then added 'or the milk ... or the tea for that matter.'

'No sir ... I mean yes sir.' It said sheepishly then it turned and trotted out of the room.

'It'd be a miracle if she brings cups.' Fudd grumbled from the corner near the fire, rolling his eyes exasperatingly as he put his feet up on the stool before him.

'So Emerick, what do we do now?' asked Waldo sitting back in his chair and tapping a pipe on a small round dish he had picked up from the side table.

The thin bearded wizard who had remained standing walked over to the fireplace, bent down and began prodding the fire with a metal poker, sending sparks soaring up the chimney. He turned and looked at Hagrid and Harry.

'Sooty will make you a room each for the night. You will be safe here until morning at least, however,' he looked directly at Harry from under his brow 'You-Know-Who will be aware of your presence here by now and there will almost certainly be some of his minions in the Hollow seeking you. I advise you not to attempt to return to Achilles Lane under any circumstances.'

Harry dropped his eyes to the worn rug at his feet. Disappointment washed over him again at the thoughts that his search had turned up nothing, and he was beginning to feel extremely guilty for bringing Hagrid with him. He was beginning to see it as a rather selfish endeavour after all.

Emerick turned and stared into the flames, the glowing flickers danced across his face. 'We were fortunate tonight. You must have caught them off guard, they were not monitoring the site as closely as I would have expected. Next time...' he said as he turned back to Harry 'you will not be so lucky.'

'Lucky?' said Hagrid credulously. Harry's stomach churned as he thought of the swarm of

Dementors that had enclosed Hagrid and himself; he couldn't imagine how much worse it could get, yet he felt inclined to listen to Emerick, he reminded Harry a little of the wise and gentle Dumbledore whom he had always trusted.

A tinkle of silver announced Sooty's return. She was clutching a tray that for some reason Harry found himself checking the contents of. It held a large silver pot with steam rising from it, five cups, a tub of sugar, a milk jug, and a slab of chocolate. He felt some relief that she appeared to have remembered everything and was turning back to Emerick when her rather large foot caught the leg of the cloak stand, and with an almighty crash Sooty went flying face down onto the floor, the stand tumbling over behind her and burying her in clothing. The contents of the tray spewed out over the rug.

Harry automatically jumped to his feet to help her. He yanked the clothing off her, pulling her up by the arm. She was tittering nervously and Harry could hear Fudd mumbling '... useless ... couldn't dry a dish in a desert ...' Emerick had pulled out his wand and with a double wave the tray right sided itself and the tea set jumped back into place, the mess of tea, sugar, milk and chocolate disappeared from the carpet and the tray finally settled on the small table.

'Not to worry Sooty, why don't you see if you can get two rooms ready for Mr. Potter and his friend, Mm?' She nodded brushing herself off and started to leave but then she stopped suddenly in her tracks.

Sooty looked around at Harry who was watching her with a bemused grimace on his face; it was a bit like waiting for an accident to happen. Sooty's eyes suddenly became wide with wonder.

'M-M-Mr. Potter?' she stammered 'H-Harry Potter?' she went on 'The H-Harry P-Potter?' she seemed unable to grasp the enormity of it and although Harry had gotten used to peoples reactions to him, he was feeling slightly uncomfortable at Sooty's awe; it felt akin to having a female Dobby staring at him.

'Yes,' smiled Emerick looking rather amused at the both of them.

'Harry Potter!' she breathed. Harry was looking at the fire to hide his embarrassment though at least she could say his name without stammering now. 'James and Lily's son!'

Harry's head spun round. 'What?'

'Y-Your James and Lily's son!' she turned, her mouth gaping as she breathed heavily looking at Emerick but pointing to Harry. 'Harry Potter ... James and Lily's son!'

Emerick chuckled faintly 'Yes Sooty,' he said as if he were speaking to a child 'This is Harry Potter, James and Lily's son.' She gave another gasp as though hearing the idea from Emerick for the first time.

Harry's heartbeat raced at the mention of his mother and father; the very reason he had come to Godric's Hollow in the first place. He looked from Sooty to Emerick, to Waldo and Fudd trying to read their faces. Sooty looked flummoxed, Emerick was smiling faintly and Waldo and Fudd were regarding him with interest but neither had moved; Waldo was puffing out a billowy cloud of smoke and Fudd had his finger in his ear jiggling it to and fro apparently trying to clear out some obstruction so he could hear better.

All of a sudden a loud snort came from behind him and Harry realized before he had even turned, that Hagrid had fallen asleep, the drain of the Dementors finally catching up with him. Harry turned back to Emerick.

'You knew my parents?' there was a tinge of desperation in his voice; he could hardly bring himself to hope that coming to Godric's Hollow had not been in vain.

'Yes, Harry' said Emerick 'myself in particular new your mother and father rather well.'

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Harry undressed carelessly in the silvery moonlight and slipped under the cool white cotton bed

covers. He lay with his hands behind his head gazing up at the flickering shadows on the ceiling as an ancient willow outside the open window swayed gently in the breeze. The yellowed heavy lace curtains flapped gently as a wisp of air gently wafted through and played over Harry's untidy hair. Somewhere in the distance a chorus of frogs were trying to outdo their cricket counterparts, croaking and gurgling fervently.

He breathed deeply as his thoughts churned, he had expected to be overcome with emotion at what Emerick and the others had told him, he had expected to feel elated or sorrowful at what they had to say, but instead the time spent listening about his parents had left him numb.

Harry turned his head to the small black chest that crouched on the bedside cabinet. When Emerick had handed it to him at the foot of the stairs, Harry had assumed it contained nightclothes and wash things for the morning, instead Emerick revealed it contained all that was salvaged of his mother and father's things after Voldemort had murdered them.

He stared at it for a moment, studying its outline in the gloomy din, wondering why he couldn't bring himself to open it. Turning back to the ceiling he closed his eyes. Nothing had gone at all like imagined; Hagrid had put up far less resistance than he had expected, Harry alone had been able to walk straight through the magical block to gain entrance to the ruin, they had both been swamped by countless Dementors in the middle of the street and then rescued by three ancient wizards who, as it turned out, knew his mother and father personally, and then just when he'd given up hope of ever finding anything of his parents' possessions, out of the blue he had been handed the very thing he had struggled so desperately through all this for.

What confused Harry the most was how he could lie there feeling so detached from everything.

Emerick had spent some time recalling his visits with Lily and James. Waldo and Fudd chimed in with little details every now and then as apparently the three of them were his parents' only regular visitors during their time in hiding at Godric's Hollow. They had in turn spent many an afternoon keeping Lily and her baby company when James was absent.

Emerick had remarked several times on what an extraordinarily talented witch his mother was, and Fudd had said she was 'the sweetest lass' he had ever had the fortune to meet, he said Lily had an excellent sense of humour which made visiting with her one of the things he most looked forward to. Waldo had told how she doted on her baby boy who was always smiling incessantly up at her, and Emerick said she was often to be found in the sunroom, sitting in a large armchair with her sleeping baby curled into her chest, staring out the window waiting for James to return.

It seemed they also highly regarded James. Waldo described him as a very intelligent and extremely likable young wizard who had a nose for trouble but a heart the size of a Hogwarts when it came to his beautiful wife and son. Fudd described how James always went to great lengths to make sure Lily and their son were well taken care of when he could not be with them.

He said although James never complained, he could tell he hated leaving them and would not go until he had checked over everything at least three or four times. Emerick had added sombrely that James had a great courage and strength in him that few could lay claim to, but the tension of hiding from Voldemort had started to show in him near the end; he said James had looked tired and strained the last time he had seen him.

Emerick suspected James carried the great burden of knowing far more than he was letting on; he thought it quite possible that some disturbing information had surfaced in the days before Voldemort attacked. Emerick had held Harry's look when he added quietly that James had done everything he could to protect Lily and his child that night, and that his skill and sheer nerve had managed to hold Voldemort off for some time. Harry had wanted to ask how he knew that, but Sooty had interrupted them by materializing inside the wood store cabinet by accident, Emerick hurried to let her out when she started screeching in panic and pounding on the doors with her bony fists; apparently claustrophobic.

Harry did not feel like sleeping at all. His mind ran over and over every last detail they had told him about James and Lily to make sure he would not forget any of it. As he lay there in the quiet Harry heard the latch on his door click and he turned onto his elbow as a small shadow emerged though the slight gap in the open doorway.



'Sooty?' said Harry

'Yes Mr. Potter,' came a small squeaky voice, when she stepped into the moonlight Harry frowned. 'What's wrong?'

She was looking decidedly nervous and was wringing her long bony fingers together.

'I is sorry to disturb you sir, but I is thinking you would still be awake sir ...' she looked at Harry through her wide grey eyes which looked rather watery.

'Yeah,' said Harry quietly as he shuffled into an upright position securing the sheets around him as he went. 'What's up?'

'I is not knowing how to tell you this Mr. Potter ... so, I is thinking I should just say it ...' she looked extremely tense. Harry waited a moment and when nothing was forthcoming he said 'Say what, Sooty?'

'I is not a very good house elf Mr. Potter, I is very clumsy and always gets it's wrong.' Her eyes were on her feet 'But I is very good with the little peeps as with the old ones because they is so much alike,' Harry wasn't sure he understood.

'What are little peeps?'

Her eyes grew wider still; she leant into him and whispered conspiratorially 'I is helping Lily sometimes with her little peep.'

Harry's felt his stomach lurch, 'you stayed with my mother? But your too young aren't you?'

'I is young for a house elf sir, yes but that is still many of your years. My masters said to go to Lily and keep her company sometimes, so Sooty is doin it sir.' She said 'Lily is good mistress sir, she is good to Sooty, so Sooty is doin everythin she asks. She asks me to sneak stuff for her so I is doin it.' She lifted her hand to her mouth gave a nervous giggle.

Harry frowned 'Sneak stuff? What sort of stuff?' He felt an ache growing in the pit of his stomach. 'Stuff for doin big magic Mr. Potter.' She said in awe

Harry screwed his face up 'But why would she need to sneak stuff to do magic? She was a qualified witch, it doesn't make sense.'

'She is not wanting James to find out sir.'

'Why would she be hiding it from him?' Harry shot her a look 'They were happy together weren't they?' Harry would never have dreamed of asking this of anyone else, but for some reason he did not feel uncomfortable asking Sooty.

'Ooh yes Mr. Potter!' she nodded 'they is very happy together! I is seein them many times together,' she blushed and added with a whimper 'Lily is loving James more than anything! And he is loving her back so much he is crying once.'

Harry swallowed hard 'Crying?'

'He is crying once when he is alone sir, he is scared for Lily and little peep sir.' Her eyes filled with tears 'He is good man sir, he is not knowing Sooty is there at first then he is telling me not to say anything to Lily, so I says nothink.' She waved hands despairingly

Harry's insides felt like they were dissolving; he felt guilty that he had intruded on his father's grief. He turned his eyes to the bed sheet and searched for something to say so he did not have to think of his father crying 'What was she hiding from him?'

'She is making big magic, she tells Sooty it will protect her little peep.' Sooty wailed softly. Harry instinctly withdrew, leaning back onto the pillows; unsure he wanted to hear the rest. 'She is very clever witch Mr. Potter and she is telling James she can make magic from her own death if' she lowered her voice tears streaming down her face 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named finds her peep.' An awful dread came over Harry as he listened, stony faced.

'She is pleading with him to get her what she needs and he is forbidding her to do it, he is telling her she is not to do it, no matter what, she is not to put herself in harms way and she is not to

mention it again.' Sooty looked frightened and it struck Harry how desperate his father had sounded. 'Then he goes to another room where Sooty is and locks the door' Harry's eyes stung as he swallowed hard. 'This is when Sooty sees him crying alone. He is good man sir!' fresh tears swelled in her eyes

'so you got the things she needed?' Harry said in a heavy voice. 'You got the things for my mum?'

'Yes Mr. Potter' she lifted the back of her hand to wipe her wet face 'She is doin it anyway because she loves her little peep so much.'

Harry turned to look out the window as a warm tear trickled down his cheek. He had never known such sadness as overcame him hearing of his mother and fathers desperation. Harry wished he felt numb again now.

### 3. The Last Day Of Peace?

Harry lay with his arm over his face. Sooty had left him feeling like he might burst, but now it was almost dawn and Harry felt completely drained. He had spent the earlier part of the evening wishing he felt more of an emotional connection to his parents, now all he wanted was for it to stop. The feelings that flooded him had quietly poured out as he lay in the moonlight; he had found the connection he was looking for to his mother and father, and he finally understood them.

The James Harry had seen in the pensieve had unnerved him, he had not at all been what Harry would have liked, he had seemed too human in his failings to Harry then, but now he finally understood; he accepted that his dad was very human and he had loved his family so much that he died trying to save them. And his mother Lily, Voldemort would have left alive, but she too had stood between him and her son and died to save him.

As the predawn grey of the morning filled his room, Harry got out of bed and pulled on his clothes. He went over to the small basin and scooped some water over his face, looking at his reflection in the mirror as he picked up the small hand towel and rubbed his face with it.

He studied himself for a moment, expressionless. He looked tired and drawn. A lifetimes worth of anguish and sorrow had flowed out overnight and now he was an empty shell. He moved over to the window and looked out at the dawn's rays as they splayed out across the lawn, it was a new beginning. Dumbledore's words came back to him.

'...the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything! ... you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! .... He will continue to hunt you...'

He breathed deeply; a new acceptance had risen within him along with the day's sun. Harry no longer feared his own weakness; he knew what he had to do. He would face Voldemort when the time came and Harry would end his reign of terror, or he would die trying. He owed his mum and dad that at least.

Harry picked up the chest from beside the bed and went downstairs. Peering into the sitting room where he had left Waldo and Fudd he discovered it empty, the fire long since faded. Across the entrance hall laid an open door from which he could hear faint shuffling coming from, and as he entered the passageway, voices began to reach his ears, voices that sounded very familiar. When he appeared at the door he saw a figure with it's back to him hunched over a large thick wooden table. Harry slipped the chest onto a bench top beside him.

'*Harry!*' he was suddenly swamped by an anxious looking Hermione. She threw her arms around him, breathing heavily. Harry had grown used to her displays of affection, and he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her warmly. It felt good to hold her; he had spent last night feeling very alone and having Hermione here made him feel less empty. He smiled down at her as she pulled away.

'When we heard what happened...' her face was searching his, her mouth struggling breathlessly to

form words '... are you alright?' her face full of concern.

'I'm fine Hermione ... really,' He said but she was still holding onto his arms '*really!*' he nodded in reassurance.

'And Hagrid? Is he okay?' she said urgently

'He's fine too, don't worry' he said as he plucked her hands off him.

'I'm glad to hear it.'

Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder; Lupin had turned around and was looking at him from the table. He looked grey and sickly 'Lupin,' Harry said guiltily. 'I-I'm sorry,' he began but Lupin held his hand up and shook his head softly.

'Don't.' he said gravely 'I know why you came Harry.' Hermione took Harry by the arm and led him to the table opposite Lupin. Harry looked around with a wry smile. His ever-present guard had caught up with him again.

Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones were standing by the window, deep in a whispered conversation, frequently sending glances in Harry's direction, and Elphias Doge was standing at the old fashioned stove giving Sooty instructions on how best to cook scrambled eggs. 'Fold!' he wheezed 'See? Don't stir!'

'What are you doing here? How did you know?' Harry asked as he sat down.

'Emerick sent us a message, told us you were here.' Lupin said studying Harry 'He knew we'd be looking for you once word of the Dementors got out.' His voice changed 'What he didn't know is that we had already been looking for you since mid-day yesterday.' His face was very stern. Harry sighed and closed his eyes briefly as Lupin continued. 'If it wasn't for Moody dropping in to deliver Tonks a message, we probably wouldn't have discovered you gone until it was time for you to check in,' he was frowning and looked like he was daring Harry to retort 'But I'm sure you already know that, in fact, you were counting on it if I'm not mistaken.'

'I knew you wouldn't let me come here otherwise,' said Harry, suppressing his rising anger. He was fed up with being treated like a child; tired of having everyone else around him thinking they knew what was best for him.

'Have some breakfast, Harry.' Hermione butted in pushing a plate of eggs under his nose, doing her best to avoid a confrontation between them.

'Well you are right about that at least.' Lupin carried on, ignoring the interruption 'I would most definitely have not allowed you to come!' his frown deepened 'Look what almost happened! What you did-' but before he could finish his sentence Harry let loose.

'I would have thought out of everyone, you'd understand!' Harry said furiously 'you were one of my mum and dad's best friends! You would have done the same thing if you were me ... and don't tell me my mum and dad would have expected any different either, because I'm too much like them to think they wouldn't have understood!'

Lupin had a strange expression on his face, like he was looking at Harry for the first time 'You are like them Harry, very much indeed, which is one of the reasons I'm here now.' His frown had faded and his voice was tinged with sadness.

Harry sighed heavily and looked down at the table 'I know.'

'Harry, we all have to look out for each other ... for you especially, but you must understand,' He paused as a tense Hermione put a plate down in front of him 'you are Voldemorts number one target. He will stop at nothing to get to you.' He met Harry's eyes 'I am not Dumbledore, I can not protect you like he could.' He shook his head gently 'None of us can.'

Harry looked directly at Lupin 'I'm not afraid anymore.' Something in the way he said it made Lupin smile slightly.

'I've never doubted your courage Harry.'

Elphias let out a frustrated grunt as Sooty "folded" the scrambled eggs all the way over the edge of the pan and onto the hot metal surface.

'I said fold not shovel!' Hermione immediately went into a flutter to rescue Sooty, reassuring her repeatedly that it was okay and that they had plenty more eggs to go round. Harry noticed Sooty was regarding Hermione with great caution, as you might an escaped patient from the psychiatric ward, but Hermione seemed not to notice being too busy shooting scowls at Elphias.

Emerick entered the room not long after and gave Harry a smile and a nod as he settled next to Lupin and chatted in between mouthfuls. Hagrid came down a little while later and was back to his usual self, although he seemed very reluctant to catch Lupins attention and even went so far as to sit himself at the farthest end of the table away from Harry and Lupin with his mound of eggs and toast. Everyone had emerged by early morning and there was much chatter around the table. It seemed Waldo and Fudd rarely left the Hollow much anymore and they were using a kitchen full of wizards to catch up on the latest happenings.

Harry caught snippets of conversation here and there, and he strained particularly hard to hear what Lupin and Emerick were discussing, but they were difficult to hear over Hermiones repeated attempts to quiz him. At one point he snapped at her a little impatiently when he thought he had heard Lupin say Tom Riddles name but she had looked so offended that he gave up trying to eaves drop and turned his attention to her.

He gently put his hand on hers 'Sorry,' he said 'I didn't sleep much last night.'  
She smiled dully at him 'No, I don't suppose you did.'

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When Harry saw The Burrow his heart lifted; it was like slipping on a pair of comfortable old shoes. Mrs. Weasley had launched herself at him before he had even got in the door, all in a dither; they had all been up most of the night waiting for news.

Looking around at their tired faces he started to feel very guilty. Fleur was still her radiant self, she was the only one who seemed to suffer no consequences at all from lack of sleep, 'Arry, it eez so good to see you.' She drawled as she kissed his cheeks, Harry's eyes took on a glazed look 'we have been worried seek about you! I waz beginning to theenk you would not make it to zee wedding. You are very naughty to do zat to us.' She pouted, waving a finger at him as she sat back down at the kitchen table.

'Eh, matel' Ron slapped him on the shoulder, a large grin plastered across his face. 'It's good to have you back.' Harry revelled in the welcome he received; it felt good to be back in Ron's company again though he found his eyes flitting around the room searchingly.

'Have you had breakfast Harry?' Mrs. Weasley was already at the stove, fry pans and plates flying everywhere.

'Yeah, thanks,' he said

'Gotta hand it to you,' Ron said 'you really know how to get up The Orders nose!' he was wearing a wry smile as he directed Harry to the foot of the stairs. 'What's that?' he asked motioning to the small black chest Harry was carrying.

'Breakfast will be on the table in a minute, Ron' called Mrs. Weasley 'So what ever you've got to talk about it can wait!' Hermione smiled sheepishly at them and all three of them turned to head back to the table. 'Not you!' she gave Harry an authoritative look 'You can go on up to Fred and Georges room and get into bed!' Harry went to argue; all he wanted was to be near Ron and Hermione and he doubted he would be able to sleep anyway 'Uh-uh' she said sternly 'up you go!'

'Well I've had breakfast too so I'll-'

'Oh no you wont.' Mrs. Weasley cut Hermione off 'You can stay here with the rest of us, Harry needs

his sleep!’

‘But none of us have slept!’ said Ron indignantly. She glared at him  
‘that’s not the point. Harry, bed! You two, sit!’

Harry left Ron and Hermione’s bewildered looks behind him as he wound his way up the stairs to Fred and Georges room, placing the chest on a large wooden tallboy near the door. His trunk was sitting at the end of the bed so he walked over to it and stashed his father’s old cloak away.

Just before apparating back to The Burrow, Hagrid had handed Harry the silvery parcel having picked it up after Harry had dropped it, and stowed it in one of his many coat pockets. Harry had forgotten all about it until that moment and was glad Hagrid had thought to retrieve it. He knew he was going to need it again more than likely, especially if faced with a situation like at the Dursleys where he needed to slip away.

It seemed as soon as Lupin had found out that Harry was missing from Privet Drive, he had pounded on the Dursleys door with Moody in his wake to find out how long he’d been gone. This was pointless of course as the Dursley’s didn’t even know that he was missing and were in such a state over being harassed by two rather scary looking magical madmen that Lupin had not been able to get even two coherent words out of them. In the end he had given up trying and had transported Harry’s trunk directly to The Burrow before he and Moody had left, leaving three very stunned and frightened people behind.

Lupin pulled Harry aside at Emericks and told him he was to stay at The Burrow until further notice, he said they had spent a great deal of time trying to ensure it was safe for him there and would be bitterly disappointed if Harry chose to disregard that fact and scarper off again leaving no clue as to where he was.

Harry was all too aware he had no place to go anyway, at this point he had no idea where to start looking for the remaining Horcruxes so it hadn’t been too difficult to set Lupin’s mind at rest. Hagrid was to take the bike back to Hogwarts while Lupin and the others escorted Harry here. They had seemed in a great hurry to leave once they had seen Harry safely to the garden path, stopping only to give the briefest of waves to Mrs. Weasley as she flung the front door open.

Harry sat on the side of his bed unbuttoning his shirt, staring thoughtfully at the floor, wondering why they had been in such a hurry. He was getting rather impatient with the fact that The Order still felt it fitting not to tell him what was going on. He would be seventeen in a couple of weeks and then he would tell Lupin he wanted in on it all or else! Surely he couldn’t deny Harry once he came of age and for him, it couldn’t happen soon enough.

Harry suddenly became aware of someone watching him. He looked up sharply and there, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed over her chest and eyes full of doubt, was Ginny. He stopped unbuttoning abruptly. He felt a surge in the pit of his stomach as he looked at her; it had been her he was looking for when his eyes had strayed around the room downstairs, and seeing her now he wondered how he had ever found the strength to leave her.

‘Hi,’ her voice sounded like nectar.

‘Hi,’ he answered. Stop it! He thought as he tried to reign in the emotions that flared uncontrollably within him.

‘Just wanted to see that you... that you were okay.’ She frowned slightly

‘I’m fine,’ his answer was stunted, not wanting his voice to betray him. Ginny nodded slightly then without another word, turned and left. Harry pulled his glasses off and collapsed back on the bed rubbing his face with his hands, his eyes closed. What are you doing? Get a grip! He thought to himself. It’s not that hard, just deal with it!

He breathed heavily, pulled himself back up, walked to the door and closed it.

Out of the blackness came an eerie apparition, it was Dumbledore holding his arm out before him in offering, Sirius was struggling behind him, his face contorted with effort, his hands gripping the mouth of a doorway, his body stretched out behind him as he was being sucked in. Harry reached out desperately but was slowed by an unseen force; he was fighting against the air as if he were embedded in sand. Then Snape stood before them, the same ugly expression on his face as when he had struck down Dumbledore. He had both arms raised above his head grasping a shining

object, and then suddenly Sirius roared '*Harry!*'

Harry jumped up onto his elbow, his breathing ragged and his heartbeat racing, dripping in sweat. Snape's face still burned in his mind, a lingering residue of the dream he'd been having.

What time was it? He looked over at the window; the sun was streaming through the gaps in the curtains. Harry pulled himself up and swung his feet on the floor. He sat there with his head hung low running his hands through his unkempt hair for a moment, then he shook his head and stood up, grabbed his clothes and headed for the bathroom.

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The trio had spent the following days leading up to the wedding exchanging what little information they had. Harry had told Ron and Hermione of Sooty and her revelations about his mother, both of them had eyed Harry with a mixture of shock and awe, and though she tried to hide it, Harry was sure he caught a glimmer of excitement in Hermione's eyes.

Ginny interrupted just then on Mrs. Weasley's orders to call them in for dinner. Since their first encounter he had not seen very much of her; somehow she was never in the room with him unless the whole family was present, and she seemed to spend a lot of time with Fleur, helping with last minute wedding arrangements. To Harry's surprise, Bill had asked him if he would be a groomsman, saying that the twins were going to busy doing other things and Charlie wouldn't be able to make it. Percy's name was never raised.

While Harry was at the Dursleys, Ron had spent many long hours hovering in gloomy hallways outside open doors trying to catch snippets of conversation between his father and Bill, sometimes even resorting to using a pair of Fred and Georges extendable ears.

It had become apparent the Dementors were now a formidable force; Harry had been told last year they were breeding and going by how many had turned up in Godric's Hollow there was a frightening number at large. Their random attacks had become organized ambushes where people from all over the wizarding community were targeted.

The Death Eaters had even lay siege to a number of older, well respected family homes and it was said that none were ever left behind, all were either killed or missing.

St Mungos had called in all able healers in the community they could find as their wards swelled with casualties, Mrs. Weasley, who had some skill with more minor ailments had taken to volunteering there several times a week though she had said she wasn't able to do much except reassure people. Ron had heard her sobbing one night to his father because she was finding it difficult to cope with the grief of relatives.

There was a report someone from the ministry claimed to have sited Ollivander, the wand maker previously thought missing, hovering in the shadows of the abandoned shops in Hogsmeade one evening, however when they had done a double take he was gone.

The information went on and on, all of it was pretty much as Harry had expected, but what he really wanted to know was Voldemorts plan of attack, and what The Order were doing to counter it. He was feeling incredibly frustrated as he sat in the Weasleys back yard, turning the small golden locket from the cave over and over in his hand. Hermione was leaning against Ron's shoulder stifling a yawn as he unconsciously put an arm round to support her, all three of them were exhausted having spent the last few nights meeting in Harry's room once the house fell quiet, trying desperately to work out where to start with the Horcruxes.

As yet Hermione's attempts at trying to figure out who or what R.A.B. stood for had been unsuccessful and she complained bitterly at not having access the Hogwarts library for information. They debated long and hard as to their first course of action. In the end Ron and Hermione agreed to return to Hogwarts without Harry if their letters came, it was as good a base as any and Hermione would finally have access to the extensive library, plus they would keep on studying and maybe pick up some new hexes and spells that would come in handy.

As Harry was unable to do so last time, he decided would return to Godric's Hollow to visit his mother and fathers graves. Hermione had been particularly disturbed by this but Harry had agreed to talk to Lupin about going with him, he would be seventeen and free to do as he saw fit by then so Lupin would have to agree if he wanted to keep Harry under guard.

'What's for dinner?' Ron asked

'I don't know. Your mums too busy with Fleur at the moment, she's going off for the night soon and wont be back until the ceremony tomorrow.' Answered Hermione 'your dad's taking her to the Diggory's; they were really keen to help apparently. I think they're glad to have something to look forward to for a change.' Ron brushed her hair back as she said 'Ginny and I are going first thing in the morning when Fleur's family arrive.'

'I think we should all get a good nights sleep tonight.' said Harry

'I agree' Hermione sighed 'Tomorrow's going to be our last carefree day for a long time so we might as well make the most of it.'

Harry woke next morning to a house in uproar. Fred and George came charging into the room and yanked the curtains open.

'Hiya Harry!' Fred had plonked himself on the edge of the bed, and slapped Harry on the shoulder before he'd had a chance to pull on his glasses. George was busy rummaging in one of the many boxes piled around the room.

'C'mon Sleeping Beauty!' he said over his shoulder 'Not everyday you get to see a full blown wizard wedding!'

'We're in charge of the decorations ... knew mum'd come round in the end' Fred winked at Harry 'Don't know what she's so worried about.'

'It's going to be the usual thing ... with our own special touch of course.' George tossed a box to the door and opened another.

'You're in for a real treat, even if we do say so ourselves.' Fred grinned

'What's a wizard wedding?' Harry was still trying to shake off sleep.

'Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise.' said Fred

'What's goin on?' Ron appeared at the doorway in his pyjamas, his hair sticking out in all directions.

'Ahh... our dear brother!' said George. He suddenly stopped what he was doing and looked from Ron to Harry and back to Ron 'Are you two having some sort of worst bed-hair contest or something?' 'Wha..?' said Ron scratching his head lazily.

'Well Ron is our clear winner this morning! Congratulations!' quipped Fred as he threw him a small golden wrapped sweet from his pocket 'and you did it without even trying!'

'That's our Ron! A natural at all the important things.' George said as he dragged another box to the door.

Hermione, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny had left already and once Harry and Ron had rushed through breakfast the four of them went outside to where Mr. Weasley, Dedalus Diggle, Lupin and Tonks were standing. They were surveying the area in front of them.

'We'll put it there; it's got some shade. It's going to be hot today and there's quite a few older and younger people coming.' Said Mr. Weasley

'Oh yes!' said Dedalus, bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet 'Lovely spot right there. I'll get the others!' and he darted off with amazing speed for a wizard of his age.

'Wotcher Harry, Ron' Tonks hair was a long curly mauve colour and she looked much happier than she had last time he'd seen her. Lupin had his hand in the small of her back.

'Hello!' he said with a smile, Harry was surprised to see how well Lupin looked and a slight pang of guilt hit him as he reminded himself why he had looked ill last time.

'Hello boys!' said Mr. Weasley 'Got a job for you and Harry, Ron'

'Right! We'll be off then.' Said George as Fred floated the boxes across the lawn.  
'Now ... Fred ... George, I don't want anything too over the top, right?' Mr. Weasley was eyeing them warily.  
'Muah?' said Fred innocently  
'Father ... really!' chimed in George.  
'Height of sophistication and understatement, that's us!' said George.  
'Absolutely!' exclaimed Fred grinning 'don't worry about a thing, just leave it in our capable hands.'  
Mr. Weasley watched them go out of the corner of his eye, doubt written all over his face. Harry and Ron exchanged grins as Mr. Weasley led them back inside.

Mr. Weasley had set them to the most monotonous task of all; tying little bundles of an assortment of Honeydukes sweets together; they rewarded themselves regularly for their punishing job with exploding bonbons and Fizzing Wizzbees. They had almost finished when Mr. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs looking very smart in his dress robes.

'Alright?'  
'Yeah, almost done.' Said Harry  
'Cud ff guv'n oos u berrer yob!' said Ron frowning through a mouthful of fudge.

'You'd better go on up and get ready as soon as your done. People will be arriving soon. Don't want the Groomsmen to be late!' He grinned; clapping his hands together he stalked out the back door.

When Harry and Ron finally emerged in their dress robes, people had already started arriving, Harry spotted Order members spread throughout the grounds all dressed up but looking very much on duty.

As he wondered round the grounds he looked about him amazed at the transformation. White flowers had been magicked onto every plant, bush and tree to form a spectacular curtain backdrop, and a golden silk carpet had been laid out to form a path through the middle of the white chairs that circled around a golden mesh dome raised off the ground on six thin golden pillars.

The dome was also dotted with white flowers and beneath it laid a small white platform where Harry presumed they would be standing. The shaded area outside the circle was packed with large white circular tables and on the centre of each stood a magnificent statue of a golden bird, wings half open and head held high as if about to launch into flight. The area was semi enclosed by burning torches on golden stilts.

As Harry moved through the crowd he could feel curious eyes on him and could hear quiet whispers as he passed. But today he did not care; today he would enjoy the celebrations and not worry about tomorrow.

There were many people he didn't know and some he did. To his pleasant surprise he noticed Luna waving at them, so he and Ron moseyed over.

'Hi Harry, Ron.' She had a broad dreamy smile on her face 'Nice day for it, don't you think?'  
'Lovely!' said Ron 'I didn't know you were coming.'  
'Oh yes. We live not far from here, just over yonder' she motioned her head 'I must say, I have been wondering how Bill is doing, have there been any side effects?'

This was typical of Luna Lovegood; she had an incredible bluntness about her, often to the slight embarrassment of others. Harry smiled.

'Not yet Luna,'  
'My father says he would have a good sense of smell now at least.'

Ron and Harry both laughed through their noses. 'Maybe, haven't noticed it though.' Said Ron, composing himself.  
'Probably has acute hearing too, don't you know.' Added Luna matter of factly, seemingly unaware her comments were amusing. Ron's hand went up to his mouth to stifle his laughter.

'Could be.' Said Harry with a big grin on his face, 'So are you going back to Hogwarts if you get a letter?'  
'Oh yes, absolutely. I cant imagine what else I would be doing otherwise.'



Neville came up behind her 'Hi Harry!'

'Hey Neville' Harry said 'What about you, are you going back to Hogwarts?'

'Yeah ... Gran wants me to go ... but I'd go anyway.' He looked at them nervously 'You're going aren't you?'

'I am, and Hermione.' Said Ron 'Luna says she'll be going back too. I imagine Ginny will be as well.'

'Oh, good!' he said with some relief 'What about you Harry?'

'No ... I don't think so.' Harry looked at his feet, Neville was bound to start asking questions and Harry didn't want to lie to him. He was saved by Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep resonant voice as held his wand to his throat.

'Welcome on behalf of the Delacours and the Weasleys! If you would please take a seat we can begin.'

'We'd better get into place' Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder and they headed for the dome where Bill was already standing. Whether it was the light, or the fact that Bill had never looked so happy, it was impossible to tell, but his scarring seemed almost non-existent as he stood smiling nervously.

After everyone was settled and all was quiet, a small melodic song started to drift through the air. It was hauntingly beautiful and Harry found himself looking for the source of it. He couldn't see anything but everyone else was looking towards the platform. He looked up ... the song was radiating from the golden mesh dome as it glinted in the afternoon sun. It was a phoenix song. Then Harry understood.

This whole wedding was a dedication to Dumbledore. The golden mesh dome was like that which had sung to him in the graveyard years before. And the golden statues were phoenixes. Bill and Fleur must have changed the arrangements shortly after Dumbledores death. Harry felt a dull ache in his stomach.

People started turning their heads, looking up the golden carpet expectantly. Soft 'oohs' and 'ahhs' crept through the crowd as Harry's mouth gaped slightly, the ache in his stomach rising as his heartbeat quickened.

Fleur was coming down the carpet adorned in layers of white chiffon with gold silken overlays hanging in gentle peaks, her hair was up in an elaborate knot and the tiara Mrs. Weasley had offered her in the hospital ward at Hogwarts sparkled in the light. Everyone was staring at her entranced. Everyone that is, except Harry.

A little way behind Hermione came Ginny. She was also adorned in white chiffon that flowed so softly around her, it gave the appearance she was floating. Her hair was up in a knot and soft strands escaped and wisped around her face. Harry had never seen Ginny like this before, only once had he seen her dressed up and that was three years ago when they had both seemed so much younger. His eyes followed her all the way down the carpet and it wasn't until Ron gave him a nudge that he came to and thought to close his mouth. He stared at Ginny's slender neck, straying to the gentle line of her full lips, and as she came to a halt, he found himself waiting for her to look up at him, longing for her to acknowledge him, but her eyes stared directly ahead or at her feet.

The ceremony was quite quick and a shower of bright white sparks fell from around the edge of the dome to indicate the end. People applauded loudly and Bill and Fleur kissed before leaving the dome, Harry fell in behind them, Ginny at his side. He was acutely aware of her presence and he thought he might go mad if he had to stand with her much longer, so close, and yet unable to touch her. Thankfully the crowd followed and the bridal party dispersed to the lawn area.

Fred and George put on a display like nothing he had ever seen before. There were fireworks in the shape of white doves that flew into the air and showers of white flower petals burst from gold balls they sent into the sky. Everywhere people were laughing and clapping, but the ache in Harry's stomach did not abate.

The chairs flew to the tables as a couple of wizards flicked their wands and everyone sat down to eat. To Harry's dismay he was seated next to Ginny on the bridal table. She engaged herself in conversation at once with a young wizard who was a family friend of the Delacours, so Harry spoke

to Hermione and Ron who were seated next to him. Hermione looked almost as beautiful as Fleur, and it was apparent that Ron thought so too as he held Hermiones hand in his under the table, stroking it gently. Harry's chest pounded as he thought of all that he was giving up.

After the sumptuous meal which Harry barely touched, people started moving off to dance and chat with others. Ginny had left as soon as she finished eating, and Harry noted with disappointment that she had cleaned her plate. Obviously she wasn't having as hard a time as he was.

As the afternoon turned to dusk Fred and George put on another brilliant display of multicoloured fireworks that culminated in a big golden cylinder exploding over their heads that spelled out a rather mischievous comment about the impending wedding night, before showering the giggling crowd with golden glitter.

Harry felt completely drained and decided to try and slip away unnoticed. He entered the house and crept up the stairs quietly, not wanting to get trapped by someone. As he passed the bathroom something caught his attention and he paused. It sounded like someone was crying beyond the closed door.

He put his head to the wood and rapped lightly with his knuckles, 'Hello?' It went immediately silent.

'Are you alright?' Still nothing. He rapped again 'Hello?' Only silence.

He headed away from the door, climbing a little higher then stopped on the shadowed landing. A moment or two passed, and then the door clicked open. Light streamed out onto the landing and a figure emerged, closing the door behind them and heading down the stairs.

'Ginny!' Harry ran as fast as he could to catch her. Grabbing her elbow he spun her around on the step. Her eyes were red and swollen and her cheeks flushed. He brought himself level with her 'Ginny,' he said softly, taking in her pained expression. Before he could think about what he was doing he kissed her. She melted into him with a soft groan and he could feel her pain as she kissed him back.

Harry didn't know how long they stayed there like that, but something made him pull away. Drifting up the stairwell from outside were faint cries growing in the darkness. Suddenly, a series of loud bangs and crashes rang out in the distance followed by yelling from desperate voices.

'Stay here!' Harry breathed and bolted down the stairs three at a time towards the terrified screams.

## 4. Harry's Curse and Lupin's Promise

Harry's heartbeat raced as he whipped out his wand and pushed through the backdoor. A wizard was stumbling towards him as he leapt down the stone steps.

Harry grabbed the front of his robes and yanked him to his feet. '*What's happening?*' he asked urgently, but the wizard looked too terrified to speak. Harry released him angrily, running on as flashes of light in the night sky ahead of him were going in every direction. People were rushing passed him away from the noise, screaming women pulling their weeping children behind them. There was a tremendous crash as Harry dived out into the open, taking in the scene before him.

Tables were upturned and broken and chairs littered the lawn. Several bushes that had been hit by stray curses were ablaze and the wreckage of the dome that had just collapsed smouldered in a heap on the ground. Order members were joined by other witches and wizards scattered around the grounds, wands drawn, darting around as they struggled against the many black hooded figures encircling them.

Death Eaters!

Harry bolted towards Neville who was back to back with Luna. Both of them had their wands drawn, pointing them at the four cloaked figures that were closing in around them.

*'Expelliarmus!'* cried Harry and a wand flew through the air. Two of the Death Eaters turned in surprise while the other dove after his wand.

*'Impedimenta!'* Neville caught the back of one of the Death Eaters facing Harry. Their body stiffened.

Harry leapt sideways to avoid a curse *'Stupefy!'* A red flash from Harry's wand hit the other Death Eater, knocking them off their feet.

Luna was going toe to toe with her assailant and had hit him with a Tarantallegra curse as Neville turned to the Death Eater who was now brandishing his wand again.

'George!' Harry spun round just in time to see Fred throw black powder into the air, then suddenly disappear in darkness along with three Death Eaters. George raced in after him.

Harry searched the area in front of him, everywhere there were mini battles being fought. He spotted Hermione dodging back and forth behind a tree, staving off curses as they flew at her; Ron was rushing towards her firing as he went. He jumped over a fallen Death Eater he had downed and was yelling 'Over Here!' at the two holding Hermione at bay.

Bill had taken on three Death Eaters at once, he had a wild look in his eyes and was dodging their curses with incredible speed, jumping around even leaping into the air in a back flip to escape jets of light as they soared at him. Harry looked away just as Bill's foot connected powerfully with one of them, launching them backwards.

There was an enormous struggle going on in the ruin of the tables so Harry raced into the fray. His curses flew thick and fast as he weaved in and out the wreckage, hitting two Death Eaters almost immediately before they became aware he was behind them. 'Harry, look out!' the instant he heard Mr. Weasleys voice he dove behind an upturned table. A white light flashed over his head, barely missing him. He scurried out from behind the table *'Stupefy!'* another Death Eater crumbled as the jet of red light from Harry's wand made contact. All around him Death Eaters were dropping, so he headed back over to Neville and Luna.

They were dodging curses being thrown wildly about by a Death Eater who was laughing maniacally. He quickened his pace as his blood boiled, and when he neared, he raised his wand, but before he could fire off a curse his target suddenly dropped to the ground for no apparent reason.

Harry ran up to the body, lifting it slightly with his foot, it rolled limply. He looked about him and saw two more Death Eaters drop one after the other in mid duel without any obvious cause, but a few others were fighting on, now highly out numbered. His eyes fell on Ginny, her hair was strewn across her face and her dress was covered in grass stains, she fought alongside Ron and Hermione as they downed another Death Eater. He smiled inwardly; he had known she would come, she had probably been right behind him.

With the last Death Eater on the ground, people were starting to file back onto the lawn slowly, looking for family and friends they had been separated from. By some sort of miracle it seemed all of the fallen were Death Eaters, though many of their side displayed signs of the tussle. Lupin and the others were going around the unconscious and cursed, disarming them and placing binds around their bodies.

Then suddenly, Harry was yanked backwards.

'What?' he looked around but stood his ground. A young witch he didn't know had him by the arm and was trying to drag him towards the house.

*'Please! ... Please help!'* Her eyes were wide with fear and swollen with tears. *'Please... you have to come ... she needs you!'*

Harry frowned 'who? ... where?' he hurried off with the young girl; once again going in the opposite direction to everyone else 'Where are we going?' They didn't go into the house as Harry had expected, instead she led him round to the front. The young witch then let go of Harry's arm as they entered the yard and stood wide-eyed, looking terrified.

Harry's eyes wandered around the deserted yard, wondering what he was looking for 'Where are

you?' he yelled.

The old wooden gate at the end of the long pathway squeaked as it hung loosely off its hinges, it was gaping open to reveal a young girl with silky blonde hair illuminated by the torchlight.

*Gabrielle?* Fleur's younger sister, who idolized Harry, was staring at him, motionless, eyes full of horror and tears streaming down her pale face.

'What is it? ... What's wrong?' He walked slowly towards her, his wand hanging at his side. As he made his way up the path a feeling of dread took hold of him. He broke into a run but pulled up suddenly, stunned. A figure was coming into view behind her as it pulled off a silvery cloak.

Bellatrix was standing with a malicious smile twisted across her face and her wand tip at Gabrielle's temple.

The young witch behind Harry whimpered and he felt his stomach drop as panic began to rise in him. The world seemed to stop. Nothing existed outside the three of them. He raised his wand, pointing it at Bellatrix's head.

'Don't' he said quietly.

Laughter trickled out of her cruel mouth, her eyes gleaming in the light. 'You are so *predictable*, Potter.' She looked amused, shaking her head slightly 'Always the hero. But you never stop to think!' He looked down into Gabrielle's frightened eyes. A wave of nausea surged through him painfully. She was staring at him through watery wide-eyes as tears spilled down her cheek, too terrified to move or speak. Silently pleading. His wand arm began to tremble.

'Don't do it.' His voice came out low and unsteady. Bellatrix glanced down at the girl in front of her.

'You're really not doing them any favours.' she taunted. 'Its because she loved you, you know ... that's why she's going to die.'

Harry felt like his chest was caving in on him. Sounding more like a plea as his eyes stung with hot tears, he urged 'don't ... don't do it!' hardly able to breathe.

'Aw, poor little puppy!' she mocked in a babyish voice. 'You knew this would happen. You've got nobody to blame but yourself.' She said it as if he were child. 'You knew you would get somebody killed!' Her wand hand tilted slightly.

'*NO!*' Two loud cracks rang out. Gabrielle went limp as a red flash soared over her into the darkness. Bellatrix was gone, and Gabrielle crumpled to the ground.

It was as if Harry had sunk into a dream ... a nightmare he could not wake from. Nothing felt real as the world faded around him. He went to Gabrielle, slowing as he neared her, dreading what he would find. '*No*' escaped his lips as he struggled to breathe. She was lying at an awkward angle on her back, her head lolled to one side. He knelt down hesitantly, and cupped her small face in his hand. As he turned her gently to him he saw the scorched area on her temple where the wand had touched it. '*No*' He was sinking rapidly ... sinking into the very earth with the weight of it.

There were muffled sounds coming from behind him but they seemed to him to be a great distance away as he stared at the lifeless face in his hands. '... *Harry... Harry!*' Lupins voice was swimming around his head and he was vaguely aware of another figure on the ground opposite him. '*Gabrielle!*' It peeled his hand off the expressionless face. Then there were more shapes and more voices. '*Harry ... Harry!*' He felt himself being drawn up by the arm, still staring at the sleeping face, unable to look away '... *take him ... Get him out of here!*' A faraway voice spoke. Harry dragged his eyes from her as he was pulled away. He felt sick and wanted to throw up ... '*Get him up to his room!*' It sounded like Mrs. Weasley but she was only faint, there was a loud wailing somewhere far off ... '*Open the door!*' Hermiones voice came from the distance ... '*This way, mate*' Harry felt Ron's hand on his shoulder as he mounted the stairs. When they reached the bathroom he broke away and flung himself over the toilet. He could hear Hermione's sobs behind him as he spluttered and vomited and retched until his whole body ached.

Then somehow he was in his room, sitting on the bed flanked by Hermione and Ron. He was

weakened and shaking uncontrollably. *'I killed her...'* He said in a voice that didn't seem to belong to him. Hermione whimpered softly as he stared at the floor, Gabrielle's lifeless face burned into his mind. *'It was my fault...'*

'No ... no Harry... don't say that!' Hermiones voice was raw with emotion.  
'It wasn't your fault mate ...' Ron's calming voice echoed in his ear 'it was a trap ...' his hand was on the back of Harry's shoulder

*'It was because of me...'* that strange voice again *'she's dead ... because of me...'*  
'Harry ... you couldn't have done anything ... it wasn't you...' Hermione put her arm on his back

*'I knew this would happen ... I knew ...'*  
'It was a trap ... they weren't Death Eaters we were fighting in the backyard Harry ... it wasn't your fault ... they set you up' Ron's voice was quiet.

Harry lifted his head slowly and looked at Ron 'what are you ... talking ...?'

'Those people out there are not Death Eaters. They were just witches and wizards ... must have been under the imperious curse.'

'What?' Harry felt lost, alone ... and angry, so very angry.

'That's why we were able to defeat them so easily.' Hermione said as he turned to her 'they weren't Death Eaters Harry. It was a trap ... they were setting you up.' Her eyes were red and swollen.

Harry felt the hatred swell in him 'Why? ... So I could watch them murder an innocent young girl?' his voice was laced with loathing as his eyes prickled with angry tears.

'I-I don't know wh-why...' fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. Harry hung his head unable to think straight. Staring at the floor he rubbed his hand over his messy hair, he was shaking as the anger coursed through his body.

A figure emerged through the doorway and Harry knew who it was without looking up. 'Get out.' He said quietly not raising his head. There was a sharp intake of breath and he knew he had struck her deeply. He closed his eyes painfully *'GO!'*

In a flurry of chiffon she was gone. Hermione leapt off the bed sobbing and chased after Ginny.

'C'mon mate,' Ron said hoarsely. 'I think you should lay down for a bit.'

Harry stayed where he was. He did not move. He would not sleep. His body ached and his mind was numb and he had never felt as angry or as sad, or as guilty in his entire life.

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry stared out of the bedroom window. The morning's rays shone harshly down on the scene before him. Everyone had long gone, the fake Death Eaters had been taken to St Mungos under guard and all that was left of the nights events were a few burn patches and some shrapnel strewn across the lawn. Several Order members and aurors from the ministry were planted around the grounds.

The ministry's aurors had been conspicuously absent until now, probably because Harry had not agreed to Scrimgeour's request to be the "face" of the ministry. As Harry unconsciously counted them he saw Moody emerge from the side of the house, looking up at his window. He should've known Lupin would put Moody on him. Harry felt a stab of anger; Lupin would know what he was thinking.

Realizing it was pointless trying to leave, he turned away from the window and sat on the bed. Gabrielle's lifeless face haunted him. He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes in an effort to push the image from his mind. He was in no doubt what he had to do. One thought had overtaken

him from the moment Ron had left the room. He had to leave. He endangered everyone around him; everyone he cared about. Voldemort would kill all of them, one by one, to get to him.

Harry could hear movement somewhere down stairs; Mrs. Weasley would be fixing breakfast for the guard. She had come to him during the night with a potion for sleep, though she had not tried to soothe him or hug him, for which Harry was thankful. She had looked at him pityingly and told him he should sleep, placing the potion by the bed before she left. And there the potion still sat, untouched. It would not have been right to sleep peacefully, to spend the night as if nothing had happened. He had seen Gabrielle's torment and knew she deserved better than that.

There was a small knock at the door. Harry sat silently, not wanting to see anyone, his body was weary and he felt the lowest he had ever felt. The door creaked open and Harry looked up into Lupin's tired face. He looked away quickly as the anger in him rose. Lupin closed the door behind him and walked across the room, pulling up a chair. Harry avoided looking at him; he did not want to hear what Lupin would say. He would tell Harry it wasn't his fault. He would try to convince Harry that staying here was best. But Lupin did not know what Harry knew, he did not know about the Horcruxes, he had not been privy to the memories Dumbledore had shown Harry. He did not know that Dumbledore had expected Harry to go on alone.

He would not understand.

Lupin sat for a moment in silence, and then finally he spoke. 'I won't pretend to know what you must be feeling, Harry.' Lupin said quietly 'And I don't suppose anything I can say, will make you feel any better.' He sighed deeply 'No one should have to go through what you did last night...'

'It was nothing to what Gabrielle went through.' Harry said bitterly.

Lupin bowed his head. 'I know this is the last thing you want to hear right now, but-'

'Then don't say it!' Harry said sharply, looking at the top of Lupin's head, his anger brewing inside him.

Lupin got up and walked over to the window, he stood looking out at the wreckage below. 'I don't know what to do anymore, Harry.' Looking at him, Harry thought his face appeared pasty in the early grey light.

'If anyone is to blame it's me.' Lupin did not turn to look at Harry as he spoke sombrely. 'I was responsible for the safety of everyone here last night Harry, not you. I should have seen it was a trap as soon as they attacked. It made no sense for them to wait until there were so many people around. If Voldemort wanted to kill you he would have tried when there were fewer of us to fight.'

'Instead he sent unwilling servants in under the imperious curse to fight a battle they could not win. Voldemort would not lose any of his *valuable* Death Eaters in the process of drawing you out. An extraordinarily elaborate scheme which must have involved a lot of manpower and heavy planning.' Harry searched the floor in front of him, taking in everything Lupin said 'I spoke to the young girl who led you to the front garden. She told how a woman at the wedding had approached her and Gabrielle, asking whom they were ... whether they knew you. She was another one under the imperious curse of course, except that she was a guest at the wedding. Gabrielle was only too eager to talk about you.'

'She told the woman how you saved her from the merpeople more than two years ago, and how she had been very much looking forward to seeing you again at the wedding.' Harry closed his eyes and sucked in his pain. 'I found out later the woman had approached others, but after speaking with Gabrielle, she had found what she was looking for. When we were attacked, she lured the two young girls to the front of the house, and then all she had to do was wait until people returned to the back yard. She told Gabrielle that Harry Potter was hurt, that he was lying on the road in need of help. Gabrielle rushed out of the gate to find you and that is when a real Death Eater grabbed her-'

'It was Bellatrix LeStrange.' Harry said hatefully.

Lupin lowered his head, and after a moment he continued 'She sent the other young girl to find you, she was told to go only to Harry Potter or she would kill Gabrielle.' Lupin turned to look at Harry now. He looked sicker than Harry had ever seen him 'I made a mistake Harry ... a mistake that cost a young girl her life.'

'Bellatrix did it. Not you ...' Harry swallowed 'and not me.' It felt strange to say it, but Harry was beginning to understand as Lupin recounted the night's events, that there was no way either of them could have known what would unfold. It didn't dull his pain, but it helped to clear his head. 'She did it ... she's the murderer ... and she's the one who'll pay for it!' Harry was seething inside as he looked up at Lupin 'I'm going after her.' he said flatly 'She sent Sirius to his death, she put Neville's parents in St Mungos and now ...' he looked at his feet 'now this. She has to be stopped,' he looked back at Lupin 'before she gets the opportunity to destroy someone else's life.' Harry was ready for an argument; his barely suppressed rage would be unleashed upon Lupin any minute.

'She won't be easy to get to,' Lupin said as he crossed the floor and sat himself down 'we've been trying for months. I've got a personal score to settle with her myself.' Harry had not expected this. 'Harry, I realize that you come of age next week, and I'm fully aware that you have no intentions of staying here after that.' Lupin held up a hand 'I understand why,' he rushed on before Harry could speak 'and I won't try to stop you, but you should be aware that everything that happened last night was to push you to make this choice.' Harry frowned at Lupin as he continued 'Voldemort knows what sort of person you are. He has seen the lengths you will go to, to protect others. The trap was laid with the express purpose of convincing you to go it alone. Why? I can only guess that he feels it will make it easier for him to get to you. But Harry,' Lupin held Harry's gaze 'you do not need to do this alone. I will be there every step of the way to help you with this. And if you must face Voldemort ... then I will have your back. That I promise you.'

Harry felt a surge of gratitude to the weary figure before him, though he would have no more willingly put Lupin in danger than he would have Sirius. But knowing that Lupin felt this way lightened Harry's heart a little, and he managed to let go of the anger that was threatening to consume him. Mrs. Weasley came in and left a tray of toast and pumpkin juice on the cabinet next to the old black chest. She looked as worn out as Lupin.

'How's Fleur's family?' Harry asked her quietly. She looked at him as if she were pondering whether to answer or not. He could see her eyes were unusually watery and he thought that she might burst into tears; he immediately regretted asking.

'I don't think you need worry about anyone else for the moment.' There was that look of pity again. 'People get through these things ... they always do.' Her voice was the softest he had ever heard it. 'I want you to stay in here for today ... you need your rest.' Her eyes flickered over the cup that sat on his cabinet 'And I see you haven't taken your potion, so you won't have slept.' A tear spilled down her cheek and she brushed it away hastily, embarrassed. 'You can't go on punishing yourself for something you had no control over.' Her voice was decidedly shaky so Harry, fearing she would start crying, looked down at his feet. Lupin got up and put his hand on Harry's shoulder 'Get some rest,' then he turned and left with Mrs. Weasley.

Harry looked at the breakfast tray and felt sick all over again, so he threw a t-shirt over the food. He lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head and thought about what Lupin had said. Voldemort may have wanted Harry to leave everyone behind, but he was unaware Harry knew his secret. He didn't know that Harry's best chance of destroying him was to be out there alone. Pain washed through him as he thought of Gabrielle. It sickened him as he thought of Fleur, it had been her wedding day and he couldn't have imagined a worse ending.

There was a soft knock and Harry saw Ron's face peer round the door. 'You want some company?' Harry nodded slightly, anything to stave off those terrified eyes that crept into his thoughts. Ron walked over and sat on the chair Lupin had vacated.

'Mum said you looked terrible' he said in agreement 'I suppose Lupin told you what happened last night.' Ron was frowning as if not sure he should be asking about it. 'Yeah'

Ron nodded and sighed 'He was wasting his time going to all that effort when you were leaving anyway.' Ron spoke quietly as he stared off into space. Harry knew Ron meant well, but he was beginning to wish he hadn't told him to come in. 'Have some toast, mate' he said as he pulled the t-shirt off and lifted the tray down. Harry sat up and looked at the dry bread again. If it meant he didn't have to talk about last night and still have Ron's company then he would eat. He couldn't bare the thought of putting anything on the toast so he nibbled at the small cardboard like pieces

uninterestedly.

Hermione came in while he was chewing a particularly stubborn piece of toast. It didn't seem to want to go down at all so Harry gave up trying to eat anymore. Hermione regarded Harry closely and went to say something, but then seemed to think the better of it and sat gingerly on his bed instead. 'You should try to eat more Harry.' She was looking at the pathetically nibbled edges of his toast.

'I've had enough' he said and put the tray down. 'So how's Fleur?'

Hermione's frown deepened.

'Mrs. Weasley spent all night with her. Mrs. Delacour was taken to St Mungos, Fleur's dad went with her, she was in pretty bad shape ... she kept saying over and over that her baby was dead, and no matter what Ron's mum said, she couldn't calm her...' her voice trailed off as she saw the effect of her answer in Harry's face.

He could feel the nausea building as he jumped off the bed and flew down to the bathroom, only just making it in time. There wasn't much to purge so he spent most of his time dry retching. Ron was waiting outside the bathroom when he emerged 'S'okay mate,' he said sombrely. Harry was feeling slightly embarrassed and avoided looking Ron in the face, but Ron put his hand on Harry's back and followed him up to the room.

Hermione had her face in her hands, she looked up when they came in 'I'm sorry ... that was so stupid of me,' Her eyes were leaking fresh tears.

'Don't worry about it,' Harry ached from the convulsions so he sat back down on the bed, he was feeling so weak his body shook.

'I wish there was something I could do for you, mate, but I don't think it's gonna be that easy.' Ron looked extremely sober.

'There is something you can do,' said Hermione in an unsteady tone 'get him to drink that.' She gestured to the potion on the bedside cabinet.

Ron looked over at the cup and then at Harry 'How 'bout it?' he said quietly

Harry looked at the cup and thought about what it held. Sleep ... *Peace*. He took the cup and placed it to his lips, looking down at the purple contents. Peace, he thought as he tipped it back and swallowed it down. He pulled off his glasses and placed them on the cabinet as he lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes, within seconds he felt the drowsiness of sleep envelope him.

*Nothingness.*

## 5. Leaving the Burrow Behind

Harry had not wanted to celebrate his birthday. He had waited impatiently for it to come for only one reason. He would be of age, he would be considered an adult in the wizarding world, which would entitle him to do magic where and when he saw fit.

He woke on the morning of his seventeenth birthday, drenched in sweat from another fitful sleep. He showered and dressed and headed down the stairs. Mrs. Weasley hugged him tightly as soon as he appeared, she did not wish him a happy birthday but handed him a plate of fried eggs and toast instead. Every meal she dished Harry up a full plate of food in the hopes that he would eat more than a couple of mouthfuls.

'Lupin will be here soon to take you for your apparation test' she said as he plonked himself down at the table.

'Where're Ron and Hermione?' he had checked their rooms before coming down, and finding them empty, had expected to see them at the kitchen table, tucking into breakfast.

'They've already eaten' she said 'they're outside somewhere' When Harry immediately got up to leave she pushed him back down in his seat. 'Oh no you don't!' she said 'you'll eat first! And a decent amount too this time.' her voice was stern but her eyes were full of concern 'You're getting



thinner every day...'

Harry pushed the oozing eggs to the side of his plate and managed to down two pieces of toast and butter. He waited until Mrs. Weasley had her back turned then left the table quietly and went outside in search of his two best friends.

He found them huddled together under the enormous willow tree, in hushed conversation. Several aurors were wandering the perimeter, eyeing Harry as he made his way over to Ron and Hermione. As he neared them, they stopped whispering and looked up guiltily.

'What's up?' Harry frowned down at them.

'Nothing' they said in unison. Harry looked from one to the other; his eyes narrowed 'Right'

'Lupin not here yet then?' Ron said quickly

'No ... not yet ... what were you just-'

'I know you'll be fine Harry' Hermione interrupted 'you've apparated a few times now ... even conducted a side-along ... you'll pass no problems.' She said with a wave of her hand.

'Maybe ... but what were you-'

'And if I can pass' Ron said 'you definitely can!' Harry shrugged and opened his mouth to speak.

'Did he say what time you'd be back?' asked Hermione 'Lupin I mean'

'No, he didn't ... What-'

'So how does it feel, knowing you can do magic whenever you want?' Ron grinned at him

'No different really' Harry was beginning to lose his temper 'what were you two-'

'Harry!' Harry looked over his shoulder at Lupin, who was coming down the stone steps with Tonks in his wake. He was carrying an empty milk bottle in one hand and his wand in the other. 'Ready to go?'

Harry turned towards him and nodded.

'Good. Alright!' Lupin motioned to two of the aurors nearby. 'Ministry orders' said Lupin in answer to Harry's frown 'you've got to have at least two of them wherever you go.' Harry recognized Dawlish as he jogged over and nodded at Lupin, he did not know the other man. Lupin tapped the bottle with his wand. 'Portus' the bottle glowed for a moment as it shook in Lupin's hand, then returned to normal.

Harry went to place his finger on the portkey but paused and looked back at Ron and Hermione and said accusingly. 'I'm not finished with you two yet!' They raised their eyebrows as Harry turned his attention back on the bottle. He placed his finger on it, looking around at the four faces opposite him. He just had time register how over the top it seemed to have four escorts to the Ministry of Magic for his apparation test, before he felt the familiar pull behind his navel and the world began to swirl around him.

They were in the Atrium in the Ministry of Magic. It was much less bustling than it had been last time Harry was here during opening hours. He noticed several wizards standing at the entrance to the golden gates, all dressed in the same emerald robes that bore a Ministry badge on the right hand side above the chest.

'Ministry Guards' whispered Tonks in Harry's ear. The golden statues of the wizard, witch, centaur and house elf that had been destroyed in the fight against Voldemort just over a year ago had not been replaced. Instead only the platform remained, still surrounded by the pond Harry had thrown numerous Galleons into when he had been on trial two years ago.

'What's that?' Harry leant to one side to avoid a small, silent black orb, no bigger than a golden snitch that glided passed him, circled back and then proceeded to weave through them.

'It's a Stalker' Tonks continued 'It's sort of a floating eye that can think for itself' Harry raised his eyebrows 'it's extraordinarily useful. It will follow anyone it is suspicious of or has been told to watch out for, relaying the images back to the receiver.' Tonks was smiling as she watched it zoom over to some new arrivals that had just entered through the floo network. 'They are extremely rare, the ministry has one of only three known in existence.' She glanced sideways at Harry 'The Order could use one of those on you permanently.' Harry was silently grateful they did not have one.

Once through security at the large golden gates, they headed to the elevators and disembarked at Level Six where the *Apparation Test Centre* was located. They passed more of the Ministry guards as Lupin guided Harry along the corridor. Suddenly a familiar voice sounded from behind them.

'Harry!'

Harry sighed as he turned, preparing himself. 'Can I have a word with you?' Scrimgeour said as he caught up to them '... in private' he added looking at Lupin. Harry shrugged 'I still don't have anything to tell you.'

Scrimgeour frowned and said 'Maybe I have something to tell you.'

Harry eyed him for a moment before following him back down the corridor towards the lifts. 'What?' he said flatly.

'There is a fair bit of speculation going on Harry, as to what you will do now you've come of age.' Scrimgeour spoke in a low voice. 'And after what happened the other night, the death of that young girl ... well,' Harry could just make out the tell tale glistening of sweat on Scrimgeour's face 'quite frankly, most people believe you will leave ... disappear from public view.'

Harry could feel the anger creeping inside him but he kept his voice even 'I don't see how that concerns you. Seems to me that's my business now I'm an *adult*' 'Unfortunately, that is not quite true, young man. You're somewhat of a special case, as you well know. People would feel ... more secure if they knew you were around. After all, it is my job to make sure people feel safe.'

'I'm sure if you put the Death Eaters behind bars, find a way to stop the Dementors, and destroy Voldemort, you'd be well on the way to making people feel *secure*.' 'You're being foolish.' Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed, his voice suddenly growing cold 'You need my help ... the Ministry's protection.'

Harry looked back at Dawlish and the other aurors 'Take them back. I don't want them. They'd be better put to use elsewhere.'

'You won't survive a month on your own out there.' Scrimgeour said unpleasantly.

'Stan Shunpike is still locked up I take it?' Scrimgeour's scowl was enough of an answer. 'As I've said before *Minister*, you should concentrate on the people who *do* need you.' Harry said it with deliberate pleasantness, then turned and left leaving an angry Scrimgeour at the lifts. He then followed Lupin and Tonks through a door marked *Apparation Test Centre*.

It was as easy as Hermione had said it would be, although Harry still disliked the sensation. He returned to the Atrium with the test instructor after Lupin spoke to him at length, and they took the floo to Hogsmeade. Harry had to apparate himself in front of "The Hog's Head" and then do one more jump to the boarded up Zonko's before they returned. Once he had his license, he made his way back to the Atrium with Lupin and Tonks, the two ministry aurors trailing behind, the Stalker hovering over them quietly. Harry could almost see Scrimgeour sitting in his office watching them.

'All right Harry; we'll apparate to the gate at The Burrow. Ready?' Lupin smiled faintly. Harry nodded and closed his eyes tightly.

Once at The Burrow, he went to head inside but Tonks grabbed his arm lightly, 'This way Harry' she said as she led him round to the back of the house. When they reached the backyard Harry stood for a moment looking about him, wondering what was going on.

There were more than a dozen people milling around on the grass.

'Hiya Harry!' It was Angelina Johnson who noticed them first; she was standing with Alicia, Katie and Ginny, waving at Harry with a big grin on her face. As they came forward to greet him, Harry spotted Fred and George standing with Ron and Hermione, and next to them he almost couldn't believe it, was Hagrid.

'What's going on?' Harry said, bewildered.

'We thought you might like a round of Quidditch to celebrate getting your license.' Ron was grinning

from ear to ear  
'But ... how ...'

'Took a fair bit of organizing, but everyone was really keen to come.'  
'Course we were!' said Fred 'Not everyday you get your Apparation License, is it?' chimed in George with a wink.  
'I don't ... understand ...' Harry looked at Neville and Luna who were smiling broadly at him

'Go and get your gear on!' said Angelina, turning him back to the house. It was then that Harry realized she was in full Quidditch garb, along with all the other old team members.

He left them behind feeling somewhat dazed as he climbed the stairs to change. It struck him that this had been what Ron and Hermione were whispering about earlier, they must have organized it over the past few days ... come to think of it, Pigwidgeon had seemed awfully excited lately, though it had been hard to tell the difference considering his normal state of elation.

Harry was not fooled that it was to celebrate his Apparation license, and even though the thought of celebrating his birthday had repulsed him only this morning, he felt deeply touched that Ron and Hermione had gone to so much trouble.

When he emerged fully attired, Hagrid grinned at him 'Thought you might be needin this.' He handed Harry the Firebolt he had left in his hut before leaving for Godric's Hollow. The aurors and Order members split up so some could station themselves around the field, and the original Gryffindor Quidditch team (minus Wood who was overseas playing pro according to Angelina) headed to the old paddock the Weasleys used for practice, talking amongst themselves.

Lupin and Tonks chatted to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid as they walked along and Dean and Seamus were stifling smiles as Luna launched into an exaggerated explanation of how a Snorkelled Mudlug Slug breathed through it's snorkel part to a very interested looking Neville.

When Harry hit the field and launched himself into the air it felt like the weight of the world had lifted off his shoulders. He let go of everything that had happened over the past few months and flew around the paddock feeling freer than he had felt in a long time. George had brought a set of real Quidditch balls with him, including the snitch, which Harry and Ginny raced after. She did not show any sign of her last meeting with him, for which Harry was glad. He was still appreciative of Ginny's skill on a broom, even though he caught the snitch before her. She had incredible grace and yet an aggressive drive that meant they almost collided a couple of times, though laughing it off as they flew into another round.

Cheers were regularly heard from Seamus and Dean, and even Lupin could be heard saying a triumphant *Yes!* Every now and then, much to Hagrid's apparent surprise. Ron appeared to have no problem with nerves in front of so few people, and made some spectacular saves to the roaring delight of Mrs. Weasley.

'I'm tempted to let them go through just so she doesn't do that!' Ron said to Harry about her whooping.

Ron's mum was a particularly enthusiastic supporter. At one point when Angelina scored an extremely difficult goal in the makeshift hoops Mr. Weasley had set up, Mrs. Weasley threw her hands up in the air and did a little victory dance with Neville looking on nervously like he thought she might explode.

'*That* is why we never bring mum to a match.' Said Fred when he stopped near Harry.

It was the best day Harry could remember having in a long time, and when they finally retired to the backyard for dinner, the mood at The Burrow was lighter than it had been yet. They all sat and laughed and talked like there were no other cares to worry them. Harry ate so much he had to slouch in the chair to make himself comfortable, and as the evening wore on he reluctantly waved goodbye to his fellow Gryffindor students, and Luna and Hagrid. Not long after Mrs. Weasley went off to bed followed by Mr. Weasley, and Lupin and Tonks left with Fred and George leaving just Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny sitting by the fireside in the lounge.

Harry watched the flames dancing glow on Ginny's red hair for a while as they sat in silence. 'Thanks guys.' Harry said quietly 'It was a good day.' Hermione's eyes twinkled as she smiled at him, her head leaning lazily on Ron's chest. No one said anything; nothing needed to be said. The four of them sat for the longest time, savouring their last peaceful moments together before Harry finally rose and went to bed, the others trailing after him.

He lay in the silvery moonlight, thinking that this had been by far the best birthday he had ever had. A smile crept across his face; he felt very lucky to have friends like Ron and Hermione. His thoughts were interrupted suddenly and he turned his head as the bedroom door clicked open and a small figure swept through and closed it quietly behind them. It padded over to the bed as Harry lifted himself on his elbow.

That wonderful faint flowery smell filled his senses as Ginny scooted into bed alongside him with her back to him, afraid he would turn her away. He closed his arm over her and pulled her to him. He knew why she had come, he too had felt the need for her and though his head told him to make her leave, his heart ached for her to stay.

Harry had longed to feel her warm body beside him and now that he held her close he could no longer stop himself. He brushed her hair back with his hand and she turned her face to him. Bending his head, he brought his lips to hers, a fire burning inside him. She gave herself to him as hot tears trickled down her face.

It was the tenderest thing Harry had ever known, her lips were soft and warm and her taste was sweet. His kisses grew more urgent as her hands on his bare skin sent shivers through him. He could feel her unsteady breathing, her body weighted down by his. He kissed away the dampness on her cheeks and buried his head in her neck as she entwined her fingers in his hair. The need in him flared dangerously so he took some deep, ragged breaths before lifting his head and looking at her. Though her green eyes smouldered with passion, Harry could see fear behind them as they stared up at him. A dull ache pulsed through him 'I cant' he said breathing heavily.

Her eyes filled with tears 'Harry' she said throatily 'please' pulling his face to hers and kissing him invitingly. He lost himself in her want as he kissed her deeply, welcoming the sensation of her tongue on his. And when he finally looked down at her again he was searching her face. He could see the doubt she tried to conceal. He swallowed hard, his body shaking with desire. 'I cant' he pulled his weight off her; afraid he would give in if she kissed him like that again.

She threw the covers off and went to leave but Harry grabbed her by the wrist. 'Don't go' He whispered. She paused for a moment then allowed him to pull her back down, moulding herself to his body, and as he lay there listening to her breathing, waiting for sleep to take them, his chest pained with the thought that this could be their last time alone together.

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Ginny's lips brushed Harry's cheek lightly as she slipped out of bed just before dawn. Harry opened his eyes when he heard the door click shut and threw an arm over his forehead angrily. She had offered him comfort he could not have sort for himself, but he was regretting his decision to lay with her. Every step closer to her he took made it that much more dangerous for her. He rolled on his side cursing himself for his weakness, hating himself for needing her.

As he looked at the gloomy shadows around the room his eyes fell on the small black chest Emerick had given him. It had crouched there since he had first arrived at The Burrow, unopened and unheeded. He flung his feet on the floor and pulled his wand from under the pillow and pointed it at the thick white candle on his bedside cabinet. He narrowed his eyes ... *Incendio* he thought. The room remained in darkness. Harry redoubled his efforts and narrowed his eyes further still, casting a piercing gaze at the deadened candle. *Incendio!* It ignited immediately, throwing off a gentle light that filled the room by which Harry dressed.

He snatched up the chest and sat it down on the bed, examining the lock. It looked simple enough so Harry pointed his wand at it. *Alohomora* he thought. Nothing happened. Determined to practice

his non-verbal spells he tried again *Alohomora!* Still nothing. Frustrated with himself he said aloud '*Alohomora!*' fully expecting the rusted old lock to spring open; but it remained firmly shut. Harry sighed and lifted the chest to the candlelight. He peered into the lock and could just make out something jammed deep inside it.

He pointed his wand at the lock and stared hard at it *Waddiwasi!* Something shot out of the lock, collided with Harry's head then rebounded onto the floor. 'Owe...' he rubbed his hand at the smarting patch of forehead while searching for what had hit him. He picked up what looked like an old bit of chewed paper. He tossed it onto the bed with a scowl and turned his attention back on the chest. *Alohomora!* He thought determinedly, the tip of his wand hovering next to the lock. It opened with a small *flock*. Harry rested the chest on his knees so that it was close to the light and lifted the lid.

On top there was a small scroll, stained and tattered, and frayed round the edges. Harry picked it out and unrolled it carefully, studying the faded patchy writing that remained. The words near the edge of the parchment were gone but he could make out most of it...

*...rest Lily,*

*...e home as soon as...  
...merick to deliver this t...  
...received news of his pla...  
...will be all hands on d...  
...w is my little guy do...  
...bout you both, day and...  
...in with Sooty to make su...  
...member to use the m...  
...will come as soon as...  
...ss you my darling Lily...  
...unior a hug from his da...  
...y love, James*

It was almost as though his father had spoken to him from the grave as it must have been written during the time they were in hiding. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach as he finally rolled it back up and placed it carefully on the bed, turning back to the chest again.

Harry pulled out a couple of small badly tarnished, silver figurines. It took him a while staring at them intently, to work out what they were. Both were of people, however one was of a bearded man, tall and straight with a long pointed hat and a staff grasped in one hand, the other was of a woman, dressed in flowing robes, her head adorned with an elaborate tiara. Harry turned them over in his fingers, wondering why they looked familiar to him. He placed them on the bed next to the scroll and dipped into the chest once again.

There was a pendant attached to a gold chain and an assortment of loose trinkets, all were tarnished almost beyond recognition, though he could still make out a couple of them, one of which appeared to be a miniature gold broom; if it had any magical properties, they had long since been destroyed. The other was a stubby brass candle that was burnt and stained and also appeared to hold no magical powers. The pendant looked like a wheel and it too was blackened round the edges.

After putting them aside, Harry reached in to find a blotchy white card resting on a mound of blue cloth that had yellowed stains and scorch marks around the edges. He brought the card up to the light and turned it over, and there, with smiles on their faces and a baby cradled in their arms, sat James and Lily Potter. But unlike other photo's Harry had seen of his mother and father, this James and Lily's smile did not reach their eyes. They were sitting in a brightly lit room on a long floral couch, and Harry knew it was the sunroom Emerick had spoken of. The room where his mother would sit and wait for James.

He placed it face up on the bed, alongside the other bits and pieces, and then peered into the chest to remove the last item. When Harry lifted it out of the chest he was surprised by its spongy feel and as he brought it closer to him he realized what he had mistaken for a wad of blue material was actually a small teddy bear. One of its ears was burnt off and its shaggy blue fur was scorched and patchy in places. It only had one eye and where a little red tongue should've been poking out, there

were only traces of thin red threads dangling aimlessly. Harry pulled at the loose threads with a bittersweet smile on his face. It was grubby and tatty and worthy of the rubbish bin but it was a small link in the chain that connected him to his past so he placed it back inside the chest carefully before replacing the other items and closing the lid.

The pendant dangled from Harry's hand as he stored the chest inside his trunk. He had unconsciously decided not to pack it away with everything else and as he looked at it again he thought of his mother and father and wondered if either of them had worn it very often. He placed the pendant around his neck, tucking it into his clothes just as there was a knock at the door. Harry grunted, wondering who it could be as the dawn's light was only just beginning to creep across the floor.

'Hey' Ron poked his head around the door, and seeing Harry dressed he entered and closed the door behind him. 'Thought you'd be up early. So today's the day then.'

Harry nodded and smiled faintly.

'Your not planning to go yet though ... I mean, this early? Mum and dad'll want to talk to you first.' 'I've been thinking about where I should go.' Harry looked out the window 'I want to visit my parents graves, but I don't think it would be a smart thing to do right now.' He could see the ministries aurors slouched around the yard.

'Yeah' Ron joined him at the window 'There's always The Headquarters' he shrugged 'I mean, it's yours now anyhow.' Harry didn't relish the thought of returning there. Sirius had regarded it as a prison before he died, and it was one of the least homely places you could imagine.

'I think I'll go back there ... at least for now.' He looked at Ron 'Maybe they've finally managed to remove Sirius's mums portrait.' he said with a wry smile.

'I wouldn't count on it mate' Ron smiled as he led Harry out of the room 'Something tells me she's one stubborn old witch!'

'Alright, Harry?' Tonks greeted him as they entered the kitchen, dangling a bit of egg-white from her fork.

'You two, sit!' Mrs. Weasley said sharply, she was bustling about with the pots and pans looking highly agitated. Harry tried to catch Ron's eye but he seemed extremely concerned with where his feet were going as he moved to the table and sat without a word. Mrs. Weasley unceremoniously plonked a large bowl full of scrambled eggs between them before she sent two plates flying their way. Harry had to duck and use his lightening reflexes to grasp his plate as it came close to taking his head off, and Ron's flew right passed him and shattered against the wall behind. Harry pulled out his wand *Reparo!* He handed Ron the newly repaired plate.

'Oh!' A dish piled high with bacon that Mrs. Weasley had been sending their way turned on its head as she blustered out of frustration. She waved her wand heatedly and the spilled bacon flew to the bin. Then she turned her back to them and started frying a new batch, mumbling grumpily under her breath.

'*What's wrong with her?*' mouthed Harry at Tonks, giving up on Ron who seemed to be avoiding him. Tonks gave a non-committal shrug as she took another mouthful. Hermione appeared not long after, looking around at their faces sheepishly. She seemed to be aware of the tension as she sat at the table and watched Mrs. Weasley float the newly cooked bacon over to them while the pan in the sink cleaned itself.

Before the bacon dish could land safely on the table however, it began to spin wildly in mid air. Pieces of bacon flew off in all directions as Harry, Ron and Hermione ducked for cover, and Tonks was on her feet and with a wave of her wand the now empty plate came to a rest in the middle of the table.

Mrs. Weasley was beside herself. '*Oh not another one!*'

'Maybe I'd better cook the bacon, Molly' Tonks said as she flicked her wrist, bits of bacon lifting into the air and flinging themselves in the bin.

'NO!' Mrs. Weasley started 'Oh ... er ... I mean, that's quite alright dear, I can manage.' She obviously thought the damage she was doing was still preferable to unleashing Tonks in the kitchen.

'Morning all!' Harry looked up and saw Mr. Weasley come through the door, Ginny trailing behind. As he watched her remove her coat their eyes met briefly, but she looked away quickly before moving to the table and sitting opposite him. There were no more accidents with the bacon after that as they sat and ate, verbally replaying some of the previous days Quidditch.

Ginny ate in silence, pushing the food around her plate impatiently, seemingly annoyed about something. Harry had never felt sorry for a mushroom before, but watching Ginny stabbing at hers repeatedly with her fork gave him the rather uncomfortable feeling that she was not seeing a mushroom at all. Once she had reduced it to tatters she shoved it to one side of the plate and started in on an unsuspecting piece of tomato.

'Harry, I'd like to have a chat with you, if I may?' As the breakfast was being cleared Mr. Weasley lifted himself from the table and headed for the lounge. Harry followed, feeling all eyes on them. 'Sit down, Harry' Mr. Weasley said as Harry entered the room. He stood with his arm resting on the mantelpiece above the cold fireplace. 'Lupins informed me that you will be leaving us today?'

'Yes' Harry said quietly.

Mr. Weasley raised one eye brow 'I cant say I'm surprised. In fact, every morning I come down I've been half expecting you to be gone.' He spoke sombrely now 'Without Moody here I'm almost certain that would have been the case a week ago. Have you thought about where you're going?'

Harry nodded 'To Head Quarters.' Mr. Weasley moved over to the armchair next to Harry and perched himself on the edge of it.

'Harry ... you're like a son to Molly and I,'

Harry felt a dull ache in the pit of his stomach as Mr. Weasley went on quietly 'our home is your home, and it always will be. If you want to come back ... if you ever need a place to go, remember that.' Harry didn't speak; fearing his voice would be unsteady. Mr. Weasley sighed deeply 'Now that you've come of age there's one or two things you need to know.' Mr. Weasley was eyeing him with a mixture of curiosity and sadness 'I think its time you became a member of The Order of The Phoenix ... if you still want to-'

'Of course I do.' Harry said quickly.

Mr. Weasley nodded 'I'll arrange to have you inducted tomorrow. How are you getting to Head Quarters? Have you arranged to meet Lupin there?'

Harry shook his head and swallowed 'I'm going alone.'

'No you're not.' Ron and Hermione were standing in the doorway watching them. 'I told you once before mate, Hermione and I are staying with you.' Ron was looking at Harry seriously as he walked forward 'Hogwarts doesn't start for a month, until then we go where, you go.'

'No, I don't-'

'Don't argue with them!' Mrs. Weasley appeared with Tonks at her side. Her eyes were watering as she looked sternly at Harry. 'The three of you have been best friends for six years, and if ever there was a time you needed each other it's now.'

'Molly's right,' Mr. Weasley put his arm on Harry's shoulder as he peered from Ron to Mrs. Weasley 'you might as well accept it, I don't suppose you have any choice in the matter anyway.'

Harry could see Ginny in the kitchen behind Mrs. Weasley. She was sitting with her elbows on the table and her face in her hands.

'Well...' Harry began.

'Good! Glad that's settled.' Ron said, then turning his eyes on Harry he asked briskly 'When are we leaving?'

'As soon as we can.' Harry said slowly, never taking his eyes off her.

## **6. R.A.B. and Snape**

Harry, Ron and Hermione stood outside number 13 Gimmauld Place. Ron was holding pig's cage in one hand, the tiny owl flapping around excitedly within while Crookshanks, who was curled around Hermiones feet, eyed him impatiently. Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones were arguing behind them.

'Don't be ridiculous, Sturgis! How on earth am I going to carry that?' said Hestia, pointing at Ron's trunk.

'Well you can't float it in the middle of the street in broad daylight, can you?' Sturgis said as he struggled with Hermiones book laden luggage.

'We'll come back out for it,' said Harry over his shoulder. He and Ron were each holding an end of Harry's trunk. Hermione was loaded down with parcels Mrs. Weasley had piled on top of her before they left. She had apparently completely emptied her kitchen cupboards in an effort to ensure they didn't "fade away to nothing" while they were out of her care.

They walked through the small gate and up the path; Harry stopped and concentrated Number twelve Gimmauld Place The Black Family home expanded before their eyes, looking as dull and dingy as Harry remembered it. He pulled his wand out when they reached the front door, and tapped it near the twisted serpent-handle.

'*Alohomora!*' There was no familiar clicking of locks.

'No, no ... you cant do it like that.' Hestia pushed her way passed Harry, she raised her wand and tapped the door '*Open Sesame!*'

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks as the locks clanked open behind the door. Ron, however was oblivious to the meaning of the password, he was tapping on Pig's cage in an effort to subdue her.

'Who set the password?' but before Harry had even finished asking he knew.

'Dumbledore. Seemed to think it was rather amusing ... cant think why.' Hestia was obviously from an all-magic family, like Ron.

'Shut up Pig!' Ron said in a hushed voice. No one spoke as Harry and Ron placed their load carefully in the hall and then went out to collect the other trunk. Hestia and Sturgis relieved Hermione of some of her teetering packages and once they had retrieved the other trunk Harry and Ron stopped to look around. To his dismay Harry noticed the curtains that covered Sirius' mums portrait were still there, though the other paintings had gone. The shrunken house-elf heads had also been removed. (Harry was thankful but silently wondered what Kreacher would have to say if he knew)

'You take these,' Sturgis whispered as he emptied his parcels onto Ron 'we'll be outside on duty.' Hestia unloaded hers onto Harry and smiled wryly at him 'Welcome home!' She and Sturgis closed the door behind them leaving the three of them standing in the gloomy hall in silence.

'Let's take these to the kitchen.' Hermione whispered, and they headed through the cramped doorway and down the stairs, Ron still clutching Pig's cage and Crookshanks following. The kitchen was cold, damp and gloomy and even less friendly now that Sirius was gone. They tipped their packages onto the table.

'I'll get a fire going.' Ron said and he placed Pig on the sideboard and strode off towards the sitting room.

'Might as well get this stuff put away.' Hermione sighed and began opening the parcels. Harry picked up a piece of parchment that was lying on the bench top.

*Harry,*

*I hope this note finds you as I feel here is the safest place for you now.*

*There's a few supplies in the cupboard even though I am sure Molly did not let you leave empty handed.*

*Try not to disturb Mrs. Black's portrait, I have found her most disagreeable of late.*



*I've organized for Hagrid to send Hedwig on to you, I should be back in a couple of days.*

*There will be Order guards on duty round the clock in the meantime,*

*Lupin*

Harry smiled. The moon had been bright last night, so he guessed there must be a full moon due. Harry knew Lupin was no longer able to go undercover to infiltrate the werewolf underworld, of which he was secretly glad. Greyback would have seen him fighting against the Death Eaters at Hogwarts that night and Snape was bound to have given his master the names of all The Order members by now. As Harry's thoughts turned to Snape he felt his blood boil.

'Once we've got this lot sorted, we'll go up and unpack.' Hermione was stuffing the shelves, glancing at Harry every now and then. Harry did not speak for some time, his mind was whirling with the thought of how much Snape knew. He had known that whilst Dumbledore was The Orders secretkeeper, no one except him could say the location of Headquarters. Now however with Dumbledore gone, he began to wonder if Snape was able to reveal the location of twelve Grimmauld Place.

He looked at Ron who was stoking a roaring fire and opened his mouth to speak. Twelve Grimmauld Place! His lips would not form the words and no sound came out. 'Harry?' he realized Ron was looking at him with a curious expression on his face.

'We're finished here, let's go.' Harry said as Hermione put the last loaf of bread away.

Harry took Sirius's room up the top of the stairs while Ron took Pig to the room he and Harry had shared. Hermione retreated to where she and Ginny had slept last time. They made up their beds with clean linen left over from when Mrs. Weasley had been there and met back down in the kitchen around lunchtime. Crookshanks purred as he sat curled by the fire. Ron started to pull food from the cupboards and Hermione busied herself laying the table.

'I think we should take another look at that locket and note after lunch.' Harry was standing by the fire, staring at the flames as they licked high into the air. 'It's all we've got to go on.'  
'I've been thinking about that.' Said Hermione, placing three cups beside the plates 'What if R.A.B. isn't a person?' Harry looked her.

'Whadya mean?' Ron said doubtfully 'What else could it be?'  
Hermione shrugged 'I don't know, it's just that I've already looked up the well known powerful witches and wizards, remember? And none of them seemed the least bit likely to have written it.'  
'Maybe they're not well known ... whoever they are.' Ron said  
'That will make our job next to impossible then,' said Harry, looking into the fire again.

Harry remained quietly by the fire as Ron and Hermione launched into an argument over sandwich fillings. The enormity of the task ahead of him seemed insurmountable, and yet Dumbledore had trusted him to go on. He had believed Harry capable of overcoming the odds. But then Dumbledore had also trusted Snape. He felt sick to the stomach every time he thought about it. But he had no choice but to go on and do the best he could. Over the past week Harry had developed a renewed sense of urgency. He was running out of time, he could feel it. Voldemort had wanted Harry to alienate himself for only one reason. He was coming for him.

'Harry,' Hermione dished up a large plate of sandwiches and sat down next to Ron. Harry turned from the fire slowly, not feeling a bit like eating anymore.  
'C'mon,' said Ron 'you'll be hungry later and we're not going to stop until dinner.'  
'That's right,' said Hermione gravely reading Harry's face 'we'll get somewhere with it today ... I know we will.' They sat and ate in silence.

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'Arrrrgh!' Hermione let out a frustrated groan 'I'm going to need more parchment but this is all I've got until we pick up some school supplies. Have either of you two got any?' She had been working

through complicated permutations of the R.A.B. letters, trying to figure out if they had hidden meanings. This was her last desperate resort to find something that would unlock what happened to the original locket, and now she had finally run out of space on her lone roll of parchment. They had worked through without dinner because none of them had felt like eating. Ron's efforts scanning through books he had found in the study upstairs had not yielded any results either. All their time spent troubling over the problem had come to nothing and it was past eight o'clock.

Harry and Ron shook their heads in answer 'Might find some upstairs in one of the desks.' Harry said as he stared into the fire again, feeling frustrated and useless. He hadn't been of any help at all, from the moment he sat down it was as if a huge mental block went up around him. Hermione lifted herself off the rug by the fire and jogged up the stairs.

'Don't suppose you've had any brainwaves?' Ron was looking exactly how Harry felt as he turned another book over in his hands.

'No ... nothing'

'You know, for all our efforts I get the horrible feeling the answer is staring us in the face' Ron said.

'Yeah ... like we're missing something.'

'Or reading too much into it!' Ron tilted his head to the ink covered parchment on the floor.

Harry didn't want to admit it, but he was beginning to think Ron was right. The lack of sleep over the past couple of months had dulled Harry's brain, and he suspected the sleepless nights spent in his room at The Burrow had had a similar effect on his two best friends. He made up his mind to try from now on to get a better nights sleep.

'*Harry!*' Hermiones voice from behind them sounded so strange that both Harry and Ron turned in their chairs to look at her. Her face was ghostly white as she stood with a fresh piece of parchment clutched in her hand. They jump up immediately.

'What's wrong?' Harry said urgently.

'Hermione! ... What's happened? ... Did you get bitten by a doxy or something?' Ron grabbed her hands and started pulling her sleeves up, inspecting her arms.

'*No!*' she breathed then looked at Harry '*I know who R.A.B. is.*'

'Who?'

'I'll show you,' Harry and Ron exchanged looks and followed her as she led them up the stairs 'I was hunting around for some parchment and for some reason I stopped to look at it' she was saying 'and there it was' She had reached the first floor and was heading into the drawing room. She finally stopped in front of the sprawling Black family tree tapestry, pointing at the very bottom of it. Harry and Ron leaned in squinting at the writing. There, in tiny black letters was the name Regulus Black.

'Sirius' brother?' Ron said incredulously, but Harry knew from the moment he had seen the name that she was right.

'Why didn't I see it earlier' he said darkly.

'He was a Death Eater, he must have been close to Voldemort!' said Hermione.

'Sirius said that his brother had wanted out before the end,' Harry spoke quietly 'when he found out the lengths Voldemort was going to, to gain power.'

Ron looked stunned 'Maybe it wasn't the usual Death Eater activities that made him turn on V-Voldemort, maybe he found out about the Horcruxes?'

'It could explain why he suddenly did a turn around.' Hermione agreed

'Regulus was a purist,' Harry said with distaste 'that's why he joined the Death Eaters, but if he found out about the Horcruxes he would have realized Voldemorts true agenda, total domination and immortality.'

'Not just elitism' Hermione added.

'It all fits' Harry said gravely.

'But Voldemort killed Regulus didn't he?' Ron asked

'Yeah ... or at least his Death Eaters did. But he must have had time to retrieve the locket before they found him. R.A.B. was pretty sure his own death was immanent.'

'Well that's it then!' said Ron confidently 'He found the locket and destroyed it before the Death Eaters got to him!'

'But he didn't know how to destroy the locket!' Hermione put her hand out to Harry 'Give me the note.' Harry pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to her, she unfolded it 'See ... he wrote that he was going to destroy the locket as soon as he *could*.'

'So did he destroy it before they caught up with him?' Ron looked to Harry who was deep in thought.

'We wont know until we find it.' Hermione frowned

'But how did he get it?' Harry said aloud, then he looked between the two of them 'I mean, it was protected by very powerful magic,' his voice went flat 'even Dumbledore had trouble, and it took the two of us. Dumbledore said it couldn't be done alone.'

'Maybe he took a fellow Death Eater along who wanted out too?' Ron suggested.

'No ... Voldemort made it so that only one wizard could get to it,' Harry said darkly 'and then he enchanted it so that only two people could actually remove it.' He hated thinking about what he had done to Dumbledore in the cave. It had all been for nothing. The locket was a fake.

Their state of excitement was slowly being replaced by disappointment. The answer they found had raised even more questions. They left the room and headed back to the warmth of the sitting room, discussing the possibilities. Hermione made some tea and they slouched in their chairs sipping it dejectedly, Crookshanks curling into her lap. Their conversations seemed to take them in circles, always the same questions popped up. It was late by the time Harry decided they were going to get no further with it tonight, so they cleaned up and headed off to their separate rooms.

Harry was feeling worn out. The excitement of finding out R.A.B.'s identity, and the consequent questions it had produced had left Harry wondering yet again about the seeming impossibility of the task ahead of him. He threw off his clothes, leaving only a t-shirt and pants on for warmth, and slid under the blankets. Before long he sank into the darkness of sleep.

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There was a dull thud.

Then a slithery snake like feel intruding on Harry's skin. He squirmed slightly as he half-woke from sleep. He opened his eyes partially and tried to shift his position. But he seemed unable to move. He tried to rouse himself; his eyes opening and closing in the darkness, then suddenly, something wrapped itself around his face, sliding across his mouth and parting his lips with force. Harry let out a strangled gasp as he went to sit up, the panic rising in him, but he fought against something that bit painfully into his skin. He tried to yell but only a muffled groan escaped the dry wad in his mouth.

All traces of sleep had left him, his arms were pinned at his sides and his eyes were wide open as he thrashed about trying to break loose of the restraints that held him down. There was a sudden burst of light and his heartbeat raced. His eyes narrowed at the glare as they searched the area in front of him. A dark figure was coming into focus. Harry felt a droplet of sweat roll down his forehead as the figure moved to stand over him.

His stomach lurched painfully as he looked into the cold dark eyes of Severus Snape.

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Snape's greasy hair hung over the bed as his hand came down towards Harry's face. Harry groaned and pulled his head away. He did not want to die like this, bound and gagged, useless and at Snape's mercy! His eyes followed Snape's hand as it slipped under his pillow and pulled out the wand that lay hidden beneath. Harry fought against his bonds as a wave of nausea flooded through him. Snape was going to kill him with his own wand!

'I'd stay still if I were you.' Snape said indifferently. Harry closed his eyes and let his head drop back on the pillow. Snape was going to kill him in the same cowardly way he had murdered Dumbledore. Harry began to shake as anger seeped through every nerve and fibre of his body.

He would not die like this! He would not lay here helplessly waiting! And with the strength of a madman, Harry suddenly thrust himself against the coarse ropes that ensnared him and for a moment it seemed that they loosened. But just as quickly they pressed in on him again, even tighter than before, cutting into his flesh. Snape watched him with a raised eyebrow.

'You never know when to give up, do you' seemingly bored by Harry's useless determination. Harry squirmed; he struggled to draw breath into his lungs as the binds around him squeezed in on his body. 'Once again you're making things harder for yourself ... you should learn to do as your told.' Harry could feel the dampness of blood on his skin around the white-hot gouges the ropes inflicted. His eyes stung from the pain as he glared at Snape.

'What? No witty come back?' Sarcasm dripped from Snape's voice. Harry seethed as he let out a muffled roar of angry frustration. 'Unfortunately, although this conversation would be far more productive one way, it is necessary that you speak. I shall remove the gag in your mouth ... however,' Snape leaned in menacingly 'if you should decide to yell for help, you will be sealing the fate of whomever comes to your aide. Do you understand?' Harry felt sick as he remembered Ron and Hermione were only a floor below. He gave a slight nod; he would not call them to their deaths.

Snape straightened and pointed his wand at Harry's face. The gag slid from his lips and retreated to the pillow. Harry ploughed his tongue around his dry mouth 'What do you want?' making no attempt to hide his hatred.

Snape sneered 'As unlikely as it seems, you and I have a common problem.'

'Yeah, you!'

'Ah... that delightful wit of yours again.' Snape mocked smoothly.

'I wasn't being funny' Harry said through gritted teeth. 'Get me out of these ropes!'

'I'm afraid I cant do that, you see, I know you would attack me' Snape's silky voice taunted 'and then I would have to hurt you...' he looked down at the blood that seeped through Harry's sheets 'again.' he mocked distastefully.

Harry's hatred was complete. There was no longer any trace of fear in his voice when he spoke. 'You're a pathetic coward who only attacks people who cant fight back!' All traces of amusement dropped away from Snape's face as he lifted his wand and renewed its aim. 'You're not going to disobey your *master* are you?' Harry goaded him recklessly 'doesn't he want me for himself. He wont be pleased with you if you do the job for him, will he now?'

Snape's wand began to tremble slightly as his lip curled in fury. Harry thought that any minute Snape would lose the battle that obviously raged within. But it appeared his fear of Voldemort was greater than his loathing for Harry. He lowered his wand slowly.

'You are so sure of yourself, Potter.' His distaste evident. Then he added smoothly 'One of these days, your wanton behaviour will get you into more trouble than even you can squirm out of.'

'What do you want' Harry's jaw was clenched in rage. Snape's face darkened.

'I am here to offer you Bellatrix LeStrange.'

Harry's jaw slackened as his eyes narrowed 'What?'

'You want her for what she did to that young girl,' he said and raised an eyebrow 'Not to mention that fool of a Godfather of yours.'

'Don't you dare talk about Sirius like that!' Harry tried to sit up again, but winced painfully as the ropes tore at his raw wounds 'He was a hundred times the man you'll ever be.' His anger dulled the pain as he struggled once more.

'Really?' Snape said with amused contempt. 'Yes ... well, he did spend twelve highly productive years in prison, not to mention two memorable years in hiding on the run.' he mocked 'Clearly he is worthy of such high regard.'

'You better hope these ropes hold because if I get free I'm going to tear you to pieces with my bare hands!' Harry roared, he was using every ounce of strength he had left in him to fight his bonds, but once again they tightened so severely that Harry thought he might pass out unable to breathe.

'You're still as stupid and as arrogant as your father was! The more you struggle, the tighter they get.' Snape sneered down at him 'Lay still for a minute and you will be able to breathe, struggle...' Snape raised his brow 'and you will faint. I know you better than you know yourself, Potter. You want LeStrange ... and I can give her to you.' Harry's blood was boiling but his head swam dangerously from lack of oxygen. Sweat dripped into his eyes as he forced himself to relax and after a moment his lungs could expand more easily.

'Some sense at last.' Snape said lightly. Harry could tell Snape was enjoying the control he had over him.

'Why Bellatrix?' Harry panted, his anger had not abated; it coursed through him suppressed only by his want to hear Snape out.

'My reasons are my own.' Snape said coldly 'I will tell you where and when, and all you need to do is not-mess-it-up,' he scowled 'if that is at all possible.'

'Your even madder than I thought if you think I would trust you after what you did!' Snape scoffed 'I do not expect you to trust me.' He said contemptuously 'But you will do as I say. It's the only way you will get LeStrange ... and you want her, I know you do.' he added darkly.

Harry looked up at the ceiling. He did want her; he wanted her so badly he could taste it. What if Snape was telling the truth? What if he could deliver her to Harry so he could make her pay. The thought of it consumed him. 'What do I have to do?'

'I will let you know when the time is right. In the meantime' Snape turned Harry's face to him with the tip of his wand, and leaning in he said darkly 'you must not tell anyone of our meeting. No one, do you understand? If you do, then not only will you not get Bellatrix, but you will find I will not be as pleasant the next time we meet.'

'There wont be a next time, *Snape!*' Harry hissed.

Snape momentarily faulted at the way Harry had addressed him but he recovered quickly to a look of disdain 'I will release your bonds and then I will leave. Remember what I said, Potter. You tell *no one!*' Snape waved Harry's wand at him and Harry's body stiffened as the bonds slunk away and disappeared. Harry watched out of the corner of his eyes as Snape put the wand back under his pillow and then flick his own wand once, extinguishing the only source of light. The room fell into blackness and the sound of the bedroom door closed, signalling Snape's departure.

Harry lay motionless, furious at having been so easily overcome by Snape. His need to avenge Gabrielle meant he would bide his time. He would do as they had agreed. But one day soon he would have his chance with Snape.

As he lay there wondering how long the curse Snape had thrown at him would last, he became aware of the burning pain from his open wounds. Warm blood trickled down his skin uncomfortably.

After a time, Harry felt his body relax.

He lifted himself painfully off the bed and bathed, washing off the excess blood carefully. The warm water stung at the gashes across his chest and legs that turned out to be deeper than he had expected. Harry threw his torn and bloodied t-shirt in a drawer and pulled out his wand. He pointed it at the small splatters of blood that covered the sheets *Tergeo!* Hermione had used the spell to clean blood from his face last year, but the sheets remained stained.

Harry concentrated harder. This time the blood siphoned off leaving starkly white sheets again. Seeing that his wounds had started bleeding again Harry wiped them off impatiently and summoned some dressings, (though basic as he was not well versed in healing) to quell any further bleeding. Ron and Hermione must not find out he was hurt. Harry knew what their reactions would be; they would be horrified and try to convince Harry to report it. Then his chance to bring Bellatrix in would be gone.

Harry was looking around inspecting the room for traces of blood he might have missed when there was a sharp tapping at the window. He automatically spun round, clutching his chest as it protested painfully. He breathed heavily, wincing as he looked to the source of the noise.

There was a flurry of snowy white feathers hovering outside the window in the morning gloom. Harry walked over to the window somewhat gingerly and opened it. Hedwig fluttered in with a gentle hoot, carrying the backpack Harry had left at Hagrids, though Harry was glad to notice it looked much less full than he had left it. She let the bag drop on the floor and landed on the dressing table, looking somewhat pleased with herself as she lifted her leg for Harry to remove the small scroll that was tied there.

He gave Hedwig an affectionate scratch that she seemed to enjoy even more than usual. 'I missed you too girl' Harry smiled warmly 'I'm glad your with me again. I'll get you something to eat.' He dug out some owl treats and placed them on the top of the cupboard, letting out a small gasp of pain as he stretched. Hedwig stayed where she was, eyeing Harry reproachfully. 'It's alright Hedwig, it's nothing.' She still did not move 'Go on, go!' he laughed softly at her concern. She fluttered up to her perch atop the cupboard and trilled gently. Harry gave her a bowl of water then sat down carefully, mindful of the pain as he read the message.

*Hullo Harry,*

*Hedwigg has been diein to get back to you*

*Been pesterin me ever sins I got back from the Hollow*

*GRAWP says hullo too.*

*Hope yer sumwher safe,*

*don't go doin aneethin dangerous*

*Say hullo to Ron and Hermione fer me*

*Hope to see you soon*

*Hagrid*

It warmed Harry's heart to hear from Hagrid, and for a short time he managed to forget about the nights events, turning his attention to GRAWP. He wondered how Hagrid was getting along with his Giant brother, from what he had seen at the funeral it appeared Hagrid had managed to get GRAWP under control, although he had not mentioned anything about the giants and whether they were yet teamed with Voldemort.

When he heard shuffling coming from downstairs he threw on his clothes and went down to the kitchen.

Hermione was busy making porridge in a large pot on the stove. She had already lit the fire so Harry went over to warm himself after greeting her. Crookshanks was lurking around her feet but as soon as Harry sat down he jumped into his lap, purring as he rubbed his head along Harry's chest. 'Owe' Harry pulled Crookshanks away from his wounds and held him aloft, 'Not today Crookshanks, sorry' he said quietly. He plonked the cat on the floor and went over to help Hermione. Ron joined them as the breakfast was laid.

'Had the strangest dream last night.' he said scratching his head 'I was watching the Weird Sisters play a concert but their music was really off, it sounded really flat, like the same note right through. Everyone was booing and throwing stuff on the stage. In the end they broke all their instruments and stalked off the stage.' Harry frowned.

'Now you mention it,' Hermione sat down next to him 'I remember dreaming I was on the Hogwarts express. Cant remember any of the details though, just the awful monotonous drone of the engines.' Harry looked between the two of them. Snape had used the Muffliato charm on Ron and Hermione to ensure they would not be heard.

'What?' Ron was watching Harry.

'Nothing,' he took a spoon and filled his bowl 'Hedwig arrived this morning.'

'Any news?'

'No. Just a note from Hagrid; he said to say hello.'

As the morning drew on, Hermione turned their conversation back to R.A.B. 'We need to find out what he did with the locket. Harry I think you're right; the first thing we need to figure out is how he managed to get it.'

'Yeah, I mean he wasn't anything special, was he?' Ron frowned.

'What do we know about the defences that guarded it?' She asked Harry.

'Like I said, only one wizard could cross to the island in the boat, and once there' Harry's voice lowered at the memory 'it would take two people to remove it from the potion.'

'But you went across in the boat with Dumbledore, didn't you?' Ron puzzled.

'Yes, but he said that didn't count because I wasn't considered a proper wizard until I was of age.'

'What else happened?' Hermione prodded delicately.

'Dumbledore made me promise to make him drink all of the potion protecting the locket' he said grimly 'no matter what he said once he started drinking it.'

'Why?' Ron asked.

'Because he knew it was going to be impossible for him to do it himself. He knew that whatever it was ... it would cripple him.' Harry was unable to look either of them in the face. Dumbledore's desperate pleas swamped him painfully. 'I fed him that poison ... glass after glass ... until he was almost dead.'

'You did what you had to, mate.' Ron said quietly watching him.

'Ron's right ... he made you promise for a reason, Harry.'

'Once the potion was gone, the inferi attacked because I had to use the water from the lake to give Dumbledore a drink.' Harry looked up into their horrified faces. 'They came up out of the water and grabbed me. They would have pulled me in if Dumbledore hadn't used fire to scare them off.'

'Oh Harry! That's horrible...' Hermiones eyes watered.

They were silent for a moment until Harry spoke again 'Point is you'd have to have some powerful magic behind you, not only to get through Voldemorts defences, but to detect magic as well.' Harry explained how Dumbledore had felt traces of magic.

'Regulus would have to have had someone along who was powerful enough to detect traces of magic and defend them against the inferi. He wouldn't have been in any state to do it himself after drinking the potion.' Harry said gravely

'Regulus couldn't have been anywhere near as powerful as Dumbledore.' Ron added.

'So ...' Hermione recounted 'Regulus took someone along who wasn't a wizard so they could get across the lake ... but who had great power of their own to detect magic and defeat the inferi ... and who would also do exactly what they were told to do even under incredible circumstances.'

The three of them looked into the fire for a moment then one by one they looked at each other

'Kreacher!' Ron spoke what they had all been thinking.

## **7. Ginny's Other and Harry's Excuse**

They were interrupted by a loud crash followed by a shrill screeching coming from above. They pulled out their wands and ran across the room, edging quietly up the stairs.

'... POND SCUM! INTRUDERS IN MY NOBLE HOUSE! TRAITORS TO YOUR BLOOD! ...'

Something had obviously disturbed the portrait of Mrs. Black. She was screaming at the top of her

lungs. 'MUDBLOODS AND TRAITORS! GET OUT! WHERE IS KREACHER AND THAT UNGRATEFUL BRAT CHILD OF MINE? GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! ARGGGGH! STAY AWAY FROM ME! ... GET AWAY!' Mrs. Black's screams suddenly became more hysterical as Harry peered out from the stairwell.

'Shut-up-or-I-will-curse-you-until-you-are-nothing-but-a-blob-of-paint' Ginny said threateningly 'And don't think I don't know how' Harry and the others emerged from the doorway to find Tonks battling her way out from under a heap of bags, apologizing profusely, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looking on dumbfounded as Ginny stood in duelling stance, wand pointing at Mrs. Blacks portrait. Mrs. Black was hunched in the corner of her painting with her elbow in front of her face. 'Nooo...' she wailed pitifully.

Harry and Ron rushed over and to their surprise the curtains pulled shut with no resistance. They turned to look at Ginny; her eyes were glittering dangerously.

'Where did that come from?' Ron was looking at his sister with a mixture of shock and awe. 'She's a horrible old bat who deserves a bit of her own back.' Ginny said angrily, pulling herself up straight again.

'Yes ... well' Mrs. Weasley was eyeing Ginny uncertainly 'I think it best if we get this stuff upstairs before she starts up again.'

'Somehow I don't think that will be a problem.' Harry said eyeing Ginny appreciatively. Ginny gave him a piercing look as she picked up the small cage containing Albert, her pink pigmy puff.

'I'll put some tea on then, shall I?' Tonks appeared unabashed by Ginny's display as she turned and started down the stairs towards the kitchen, Hermione and Ginny in tow. Harry felt a stab of pain in the pit of his stomach as he watched her go. She had never looked so ... cold.

'What are you doing here?' Ron took Mr. Weasleys bags and Harry picked up the ones Tonks had dropped, then they made their way upstairs.

'Induction day, remember?' he said as they piled into an empty room on the first floor.

'Take those into Hermiones room will you dear?' Mrs. Weasley nodded at the bags Harry was carrying 'Ginny can bunk in with her again.'

Harry turned and headed to Hermiones room. He plonked the bags down at the foot of the spare bed and one of them, a shopping bag stuffed with clothes, toppled over spilling some of its contents onto the faded rug. Harry bent down and grabbed a handful of clothes, stuffing them back into the overly full bag.

As he reached for the last piece of clothing; a soft pink fleecy jumper of Ginny's he was particularly fond of, he noticed a white card lying just under the bed. He picked it up and turned it over and what he saw made his stomach drop. Staring back out at him, smiling lazily was Ginny. She looked content and happy as she leaned against Dean Thomas's chest. He was grinning at Ginny with his arm comfortably around her. It had been taken the day they had played Quidditch at The Burrow.

Seeing her so intimate with another man clawed at his heart. So this is why she had seemed so cold. He brought his hand up under his glasses, and rubbed his eyes, the ache in him swelling painfully. He hadn't noticed them together that day. How long had she been in contact with him again? He chided himself for being stupid. It was what he wanted, wasn't it? He'd told her they could not be together so of course she would move on. And yet he felt ... betrayed.

The hurt in him made him angry and his fists clenched. Just two nights ago on the same day the photo had been taken she had come to his bed. Is this why she had gone to leave him when he had denied her? Had she come to him because she could not go to Dean? The thought made him sick. He had been struggling to let her go but now he had been jolted back to reality. He couldn't bring himself to look at the photo again; instead he stuffed it into the bag, covering it with the pink jumper.

He went back down to the kitchen where Hermione and Ginny were huddled in conversation. Tonks handed him a cup of tea. When Hermione finally looked up she gave Harry a questioning frown. Harry was staring at Ginny, watching her stroke Crookshanks who was curled in her lap purring loudly. Albert was nuzzling into her neck on her shoulder. Barely controlled anger rippled through him, daring her to look at him. But Ginny did not look up. She went on petting Crookshanks, smiling



at him and talking softly in his ear. Hermione glanced at Ginny then back at Harry again. 'Is everything alright, Harry?'

'Everything's just fine' he said, irritated at his own pain. He turned his back on them and added a spoon a sugar to his cup.

'Well ... that's all done!' said Mr. Weasley briskly as he entered the room. 'Fred and George will be here later this afternoon. Lupin not back yet?'

'No' Harry said leaning back against the bench stirring his tea, he was glad he would have a distraction when the twins arrived.

'If he's not back I think we should postpone it. He will want to be here I'm sure.'

'Is that really necessary?' Harry said impatiently.

Mr. Weasley was looking at him with the same inquiring frown as Hermione. 'Yes, actually. I think it is.' He said seriously 'He is the head of The Order now and should be present at the induction of three new members.'

Harry looked up 'Three?' he said abruptly, looking around at Ron, who had just come in and sat down at the table 'You don't mean...' but he couldn't finish what he was about to say, he knew how it would have sounded to Ron and Hermione who were already eyeing him challengingly.

'No.' Mr. Weasley answered, following Harry's thoughts. 'Fred and George are becoming official members too.'

'Oh ... right' Harry exhaled with relief.

'You don't have to sound so relieved ... it wasn't from lack of trying, believe me!' said Ron, shooting a glance at Mr. Weasley.

'The Order does not accept people who are still at school, Ron.' Mr. Weasley said sternly 'Harry will be our youngest member ever and I doubt there will ever be one as young as him again. His case is unique, as I've explained to you before.' Ron rolled his eyes.

'We haven't got our letters yet' Hermione chimed in 'maybe we wont be going to school this year either.'

'In that event, you still wont be joining The Order. I am sure there are other things for which you could be put to use'

'Like what?' Ron said defensively

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it!' Mrs. Weasley had been standing in the doorway listening. 'Ginny, has that cat of yours turned up yet?'

'What cat?' Ron asked what Harry had been thinking.

'No, not yet' Ginny said without looking up, her attention on Albert.

'What cat?'

'There's been a cat hanging around at The Burrow the past few days,' Mrs. Weasley reached into the cupboard and pulled out some potatoes 'We've seen it on occasion before but it's been around a lot lately,' She fussed about getting knives out of the draws 'comes and goes as it pleases, seems to spend most of it's time looking for Ginny, at least it's always in her room. Why she'd want with another pet, I don't know.'

'Why don't you just boot it out?' Ron asked

'Because I've adopted it!' Ginny said angrily 'and if you harm it in any way I'll-'

'Steady on ... I wouldn't do anything to it ... I just thought if you wanted rid of it-'

'Well I don't! And if it turns up you leave it alone!' Ginny said, her eyes blazing.

'Fair enough.' Ron shrugged 'What does it look like so I know not to kick it out the door.' Ginny scowled at him

'It's got rusty coloured long fur' said Mr. Weasley who had been following the conversation behind his copy of the Daily Prophet 'with white patches on it's face and feet. Quite a young cat I think, rather smart too.' He smiled appreciatively 'It frightened a gnome out of my boot that would have

given me a nasty bite had I managed to put my foot in it.'

'Hermione and Ginny, you can give me a hand with lunch.' Mrs. Weasley had knives chopping speedily as she poured a sauce into a pan on the stove. 'I'll be outside then.' Tonks appeared to have given up offering her help in the kitchen and she left to relieve for guard duty.

Harry gulped down his tea and went up to his room, the last thing he wanted to do was eat. He stood by the window and looked out at the overgrown grass in the front yard. He felt petty and selfish at his own jealousy. He should've been glad for Ginny, she was moving on and doing exactly as he had asked. But the ache within him would not abate. He was embarrassed to think part of him had held some hope that she would wait for him ... even pine longingly for him.

He walked over to Hedwig and wincing, reached an arm up for her to sit on. She fluttered down and blinked at him expectantly. 'Looks like it'll always be you and me girl' he said softly, stroking the feathers above her beak. He opened the drawer and pushed aside his bloodied t-shirt to get at the owl treats. Grabbing a handful he sat on the bed and let Hedwig perch on his knee. As he sat feeding them to her, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Expecting Ron or Hermione coming to get him for lunch he said 'It's okay, I'm not hungry!' The shadowy figure did not speak as it came to a stop in the doorway. 'I'll eat later...' His voice trailed off as he saw Ginny standing there watching him. His face immediately changed and he turned back to Hedwig. 'I'll be down later.' He said gravely, his heart was pounding in his chest as she stepped into the room.

'You didn't even say goodbye' Her voice was little more than a whisper. 'At The Burrow ... I thought at least you would say goodbye-'

'What was the point' Harry said callously, concentrating on Hedwig 'you're here now aren't you?' he wanted to hurt her. He wanted Ginny to know how he felt.

She hesitated for a moment then slowly and uncertainly walked further into the room, running her hand along the dressing table. As she spoke she sounded reluctant to talk, and Harry found he did not feel for her.

'Harry, I need to tell you something...' She said slowly. He watched her as she paused, her expression darkening as she looked down at the dresser. With a sudden intake of breath Harry realized why she had stopped talking. He jumped up, sending Hedwig screeching in a flurry of feathers back to the top of the wardrobe. Before he could reach the drawer he had sloppily left open, Ginny had yanked out his t-shirt, her eyes scanning the torn and bloodied marks in horror.

'*What is this?*' she breathed, her brow frowning deeply.

He snatched the top and threw it in the cupboard, slamming it closed angrily. 'Nothing ... it's nothing!'

'Harry, what happened?' she tried to catch his eye, her voice full of concern. Harry was furious with himself for being so careless, and he directed his anger onto Ginny.

'Nothing that concerns you Ginny, so just butt out! This is none of your business!' his anger had finally reached boiling point. 'You've got no right to come in here and start asking questions! And you'd better not repeat what you just saw!' He flung his arms up and clasped them behind his head in frustration, ignoring the burning pain from his wounds.

'*Arrrrgh!* Why isn't anything ever easy!' He closed his eyes for a moment before looking at Ginny, who was staring wide-eyed at him. He knew this was the perfect moment so he seized it. 'I've already told you to stay away from me but you keep coming back! Listen to me! Stay out of my business and out of my life!' As he said it his body shuddered. Not from rage; he felt like he was being torn in two.

He breathed heavily, his eyes on the floor waiting to hear her footsteps running from the room. He had said what he had not been able to bring himself to say until now. He despised himself for his outburst, so much so that he was not able to look at her. There was a long silence in which she stood motionless, and then she walked up to him and touched her hand to his face. In spite of himself he pressed his cheek to her palm, his eyes heavy with the tenderness of her touch.

'I know what you're doing' her green eyes swelled with tears 'and it only makes me want to be with you even more.' and she closed her eyes and kissed him as bittersweet tears spilled onto her cheeks. He felt sure she had been ready to tell him about Dean, but he did not want to hear it from her mouth. A mouth that was both so sweet and yet so cruel at the same time. He kissed her fiercely, punishing her for her betrayal of him. When they pulled apart her lips were red and swollen.

'You can't drive me away, Harry,' her face was full of sadness, her voice unsteady 'no matter what you say. The way I feel ... no one can take that away ... not even you.'

Harry scooped her to him again 'You make me nuts, you know that?' he breathed and this time he kissed her with all the tenderness of her words. A sad smile crept across her lips as she pulled away from him.

'Harry! Ginny! Lunch is on the table!' Mrs. Weasley yelled up the stairwell to them.

'We'll be down in a few minutes!' Ginny yelled out of the doorway and then went to the draws and pulled out a fresh t-shirt. Harry frowned, still breathing heavily with passion. He followed her gaze down at his chest and for the first time he realized his wounds had been bleeding again, the dark patches of blood had seeped through his bandages and were creeping across his maroon t-shirt.

'Here' she said quietly 'let me help you' She lifted his t-shirt over his head and redressed his wounds with bandages she summoned, far better than those Harry had managed to call upon. He was surprised she knew such magic but she waved it off, attributing it to watching her mother. She did not ask him any more questions and Harry did not offer her any answers. There was an understanding between them, one that he could not have trusted to anyone else.

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Fred and George arrived in the late afternoon carrying a box of test items eventually due for their store. They settled in for the evening, sharing Ron's room after a sumptuous roast served up by Mrs. Weasley.

That night as Harry laid waiting for sleep to take him with his door slightly ajar, he felt something leap onto the covers by his feet. Crookshanks! He thought, but when he lifted his head to greet him as it padded up alongside his body, he realized in the moonlight that this cat was much smaller than Crookshanks, it was also darker in colour though it had delicate white paws that gave the impression it was wearing socks, and it's face was also patched with white fur that gave it a definite feminine appearance.

It looked like Ginny's cat had turned up after all and as he reached out to pet it, he noticed how soft and silky it's fur was. It nuzzled affectionately into his hand making it's way up to his face, and purring loudly it settled, laying its head on his pillow with it's body stretched out below it. Harry laughed softly.

'Shouldn't you be with your mistress? Or has she sent you to keep an eye on me?' he mused. He continued playing with its fur and stroking its head as he laid his head back down and before long he drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

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The next morning Lupin turned up, and by lunchtime a crowd of Order members had gathered around the large kitchen table. Mrs. Black had been set off three times as they had arrived banging on the door or ringing the bell. She had launched into her usual rant, though the moment Ginny had appeared with her wand drawn she had retreated back into the corner of her painting wailing at the injustice of it all. Everyone appeared most impressed by her ability to quell Mrs. Black and it was mentioned in passing jest more than once that she should be added to the list inductees to The Order.

Once everyone had arrived, Lupin asked all non-members to leave the table and then he called on Fred, George and Harry to stand.

'Before we get down to the latest Order business' Lupin said as he looked around 'we will swear in our three new members.' Lupin looked down to the opposite end of the table where Harry and the twins stood. He spoke ominously.

'You should not undertake membership into The Order of The Phoenix lightly.' He said, looking from one to the other. 'If it is adventure and glory you seek then you will not find it here. Being an Order member is an extremely dangerous and rather thankless job,' he said seriously 'if you have any doubts about joining, you should speak now before we go any further. There is no shame in admitting that The Order is not for you.' Harry and the twins stood silently firm.

Lupin sighed gravely 'Right then, there is a short swearing in first and then we will get on with business.' Lupin shuffled through some papers on the table in front of him. Harry looked down at his feet as he felt something nudge his leg. Ginny's cat had curled itself around his legs; its tail high in the air. He watched as it sat down partially on his foot and looked up at him with its green eyes. He smiled at it faintly amused. It had gone by the time he woke in the morning and yet he'd had the feeling that it had stayed with him all night. He turned his attention back to Lupin.

He was holding a piece of parchment in his hand from which he started reading aloud in the monotonous tone of someone going through the motions.

'You will now be asked to swear an oath of allegiance to The Order of The Phoenix. In doing so you will become privy to all knowledge The Order has already accumulated and you will also be able to partake in any sharing of new information as it comes to hand. As a member of the secret society you will be expected as individuals to uphold to the same truths and ideals as The Order itself.'

Harry swallowed; he had a rather uneasy feeling of where this was going.

'The Order of The Phoenix relies heavily on all of us acting as one,' Lupin read on, unaware of Harry's increasing discomfort 'and as such, no member is to act alone in matters directly relating to the business of The Order. As a member you will be required to share any or all information that may be relevant to our cause of which you either presently or in the future have knowledge of.'

Lupin had said it, exactly that which Harry had feared. Lupin looked over the top of the parchment at the three of them. 'Do you understand the terms thus far before we continue?'

'Yes' Fred and George said in unison.

Harry stood with a frown on his face; an internal struggle raging within him. He had wanted to join The Order ever since he knew of its existence, but how could he under the circumstances? As the long silence stretched out The Order members who had been staring at the table or looking out the small, high window disinterestedly started to turn their heads to look at him. Harry was eyeing them all uncomfortably; aware he was backing himself into a corner with his silence.

'Harry?' Lupin's tone was one of doubt as he leant his hands on the table in front of him. 'Do you have something to say?' Harry's mind was racing. Why hadn't he thought of this? He was unwittingly full of secrets that he had absolutely no intention of revealing to any of them. Dumbledore had told him to tell no one other than Ron and Hermione about Voldemort's means of immortality, and to get to Bellatrix he knew he was going to have to keep Snape's little *visit* to himself as well. Harry could not, in good conscience, join them on a lie.

'I-I've changed my mind.' Harry could think of no other way out of it. 'I don't think I'm ready to join yet.' He could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. 'I'd like to think about it, maybe join later like you said.' Harry thought the guilt he was feeling was written all over his face. 'I-I'm sorry ... I don't mean to waste your time.' And without looking at them he moved quickly out of the room and climbed the stairs, leaving a stunned silence behind him.

He went straight on up to his room, not wanting to face anyone. He knew Ron and Hermione would understand once he explained the situation, after all they too shared the Horcrux secret. But Ginny,

she would think he was a coward and he would not be able to explain.

As he went to close the door behind him, the small red and white cat darted into the closing gap and ran passed him, jumping onto his bed. Hedwig watched the cat from her perch with interest as Harry walked over to it, picked it up, and holding it aloft in front of him, sat down.

'Back again ... what's your name anyway?' He pulled the cat to his chest and rubbed it affectionately on the neck. 'I guess I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do when the meeting is over. I'd better come up with something good too.' he said under his breath.

'What do you think Socks?' the cat clawed gently up his chest and rubbed it's head under Harry's chin. 'Lupins never going to understand ... and neither is Ginny.' He said thoughtfully, but then he was distracted by the fervent purring of Socks as she rubbed herself around Harry's neck. He lay back on his arm with her curled into his chest and he spent a long while just stroking her. She rolled on her back playfully and batted Harry's hand softly with her front paws as he smiled affectionately at her. Then there was a knock at the door.

'Come in.' Harry sat up and Socks jumped off the bed. Lupin swung the door open and entered, a grave look on his face, and as he closed the door Socks darted through it and down the stairs.

'Harry,' he sounded very serious though Harry could detect no anger in his voice. 'I want to talk to you about what happened down stairs.' Harry waited for it, wondering how he was going to get out of this convincingly. Lupin sat on the bed next to him 'I'm sorry we put you in such an awkward position.' Harry was thrown by this statement and could think of nothing to say.

'Arthur and I should have realized that you were too young still. We were carried away with your past performance and assumed too much.' Harry sat bewildered 'Of course you're not ready to join The Order, you've had enough to deal with without taking on the added responsibility that comes with belonging to such a society,' Lupin put his hand on Harry's shoulder 'and there was no need to be embarrassed. Not a single person present in that room thinks any less of you, they are all very much aware of what you have done in the past.'

Harry finally understood what he was talking about. Lupin and the others had thought his red-faced silence had been from embarrassment. They actually thought he feared becoming a member of The Order. Relief wash over him. He wouldn't have to come up with some half-baked excuse and they remained clueless as to the real reason why he had backed out.

He gave Lupin the most sheepish look he could muster 'Yeah ... I just didn't feel ready after all.'

'That's quite understandable, Harry.' Lupin said sincerely.

'Suppose Fred and George are in?' he must have overplayed his disappointment because Lupin put his arm around the back of Harry's shoulders and joggled him reassuringly.

'You'll make it one day Harry, when you're ready. And I'm willing to bet you'll be the most outstanding member The Order has ever seen,' then Lupin added with a smile 'besides Dumbledore.' Then Lupin lifted himself from the bed and headed for the door. 'Would you like me to send Ron and Hermione up?' Lupin was being rather tactful about Harry's supposed embarrassment and although Harry had been glad it had worked out this way, he couldn't help but feel miffed that Lupin had believed Harry afraid of joining The Order. But he swallowed his pride.

'Yeah. Thanks.'

When Ron and Hermione entered the room Harry could see by the look on their faces that Lupin had told them his version of events. Hermione approached him as she would a sick pigmy puff and Ron looked just plain uncomfortable. It irritated Harry even more to think his own two best friends would believe it of him.

'Are you okay, Harry?' Hermione sat down next to him and touched his arm reassuringly. Harry tilted his head at her and gave her a sarcastic look.

'Before you both start' he sighed 'the reason I didn't join The Order is because you are bound to reveal all information pertaining to Voldemort that you know, which means that I would have had to tell them about the Horcruxes, alright? Lupin and the others just assumed I was scared and I didn't

correct them because it would have led to all sorts of questions that I couldn't answer!'

'Oh' Hermione removed her hand as her cheeks went pink.

'I knew it had to be something like that!' Ron sat down on Harry's other side and grinned at him 'didn't believe a word of what Lupin said.'

'Oh really?' said Hermione as she raised an eyebrow 'That's why you wanted me to come up here on my own to talk to him first, was it?'

It was Rons turn to turn pink.

'Look, it doesn't matter now.' Harry said 'We've bought some time, so lets spend it going over what we've learned so far about the locket.'

'Good idea!' said Hermione shooting Ron a disapproving look 'Well we're all in agreement that it could have been Kreacher who helped Regulus obtain the locket right?' Ron nodded as Harry picked up Socks who had wandered into the room again tailing Ron and Hermione. He stood up and carried her over to the door, pushing it closed, then sat down on the rug and placed Socks in the crook of his crossed legs.

'It's the best theory we've got to go on' he said 'so I guess the next step is to question Kreacher' 'That'll be a delightful treat.' Said Ron flatly.

'If he was with Regulus when he obtained the Horcrux he may be able to tell us what happened to it.' Hermione was looking curiously at Socks. 'Is that Ginny's cat?'

'Yeah' said Harry 'so ... I suppose I'd better call him then.' He said reluctantly.

'What's its name?'

'What? Oh ... I don't know, I've been calling her Socks, she seems to like it.' She was purring loudly and had her eyes squished together enjoying Harry's attention.

'Do you think he'll come?' Ron asked obviously hopeful the answer would be no.

Harry shrugged 'He's come when I've called before.'

'He has to come. Give him a call!' Hermione said.

All three of them were silent for a moment, Ron had raised his eyebrow in anticipation while Hermione grimaced and Harry was looking at them both with a wry smile. He rose off the floor and looked up at the air in front of him and called 'Kreacher!'

*CRACK!*

At first Harry couldn't quite work out what he was looking at, it appeared to be a house elf but it had too many arms and legs.

'He calls me!' it croaked 'the mudblood lover calls me to him, in my Mistresses home no less. Kreacher will go and speak with his Mistress, yes-'

'Harry Potter is your master and Dobby is loyal, even if nasty Kreacher is not!' another voice squeaked.

'Dobby? ... What's going on? What are you doing here?' Harry was standing with Socks perched on his foot looking down in puzzlement.

It appeared that Kreacher and Dobby were stuck together, though how Harry couldn't tell.

## **8. Kreacher's Mischief and Ministry Woes**

It was a most peculiar sight.

Kreacher and Dobby were standing back to back and did not seem able to put any distance between each other, rather like they had been glued together.

'Harry Potter! Dobby is most pleased to see you.' Dobby squeaked enthusiastically and immediately

went into a low bow. Kreacher, on the other hand, was somewhat less than awed at the site of Harry and looked extremely disgruntled as he resigned himself to being dragged off his feet onto Dobby's back with his legs dangling in the air in front of him.

'What happened?' Hermione seemed more than a little distressed at their predicament. 'How long have you been like this?'

'The mudblood speaks to Kreacher!' Wide-eyed and faking shock, Kreacher placed his long bony fingers in his ears. 'The Mistress will see, oh yes, she will see her Kreacher does not listen to it.' his crooked legs still splayed in the air.

'How did you two get stuck together then?' Ron asked as if he were talking to a couple of misbehaving children.

'Dobby, what's going on?' Harry said getting a little frustrated.

'Dobby is trying to protect Harry Potter' Dobby straightened defiantly, letting Kreacher's feet touch the floor once more. 'Dobby is seeing Kreacher sneaking, so Dobby is binding us to make Dobby go where Kreacher goes.'

'Stupid elf with funny hats knows not what he is doing!' Kreacher said loudly to himself 'Kreacher will find a way to break stupid elf's bond.'

'What do you mean, sneaking?' Harry frowned, eyeing Kreacher.

'Dobby knows Kreacher is up to mischief!' Dobby turned his head awkwardly to look at Kreacher through narrowed eyes 'Kreacher is going to betray his master, Dobby knows HE IS A BAD ELF!' his voice getting angrier with every word.

'What are you talking about?'

'*Master* knows Kreacher cannot disobey him.' Kreacher interrupted slyly, still facing in the opposite direction. 'Kreacher is doing as *Master* ordered.'

'Dobby, you can't stay stuck together like this!' Hermione sounded exasperated. 'You'll have to undo the spell!' she said as she crossed her arms.

Harry was trying to walk around Dobby to get to Kreacher but the little elf kept shuffling around enthusiastically so he remained facing Harry, eventually Harry grabbed his bony little arm to make him stay put and crouched down in front of Kreacher. Harry looked into his bloodshot grey eyes.

'What have you been up to?' he said suspiciously.

Kreacher seemed rather pleased with Harry's reaction. 'Kreacher is only following his *Masters* orders.' His continual emphasis on the word Master glowed with contempt.

Harry narrowed his eyes 'What did I tell you to do?' he asked slowly.

'Master cannot remember his own orders? Kreacher is indeed unfortunate to serve under such a lowly wizard!'

Harry clenched his jaw as Ron and Hermione looked on in anxious silence. 'What-did-I-tell-you-to-do, Kreacher?'

Kreacher bowed dramatically, leaving Dobby flailing as his legs left the floor. 'You had Kreacher follow the brave and daring Master Malfoy.' he said treacherously.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Harry, Ron and Hermione looked up sharply. 'Just a minute' Harry threw at the door urgently as he stood up. Socks scattered and jumped onto the bed. 'You're both going to have to leave,' Harry said quietly, but before he could finish the door flung open and Fred and George stepped into the room.

'Told you!' Fred said triumphantly, pointing at the two elves now struggling with each other to get the best view of the doorway. 'Knew he wouldn't disappoint us.'

'What are you doing?' Harry was angry at having been caught.

'Didn't honestly expect us to believe that tripe you told Lupin, did you?' George raised his eyebrows 'Not ready to join *The Order*! Pull the other one!'

'This, coming from the kid who swiped an egg from a brooding Horntail.' Fred chimed in.  
'And destroyed a Basilisk to rescue our little sister.'  
'Not to mention the Death Eaters-'

'Alright!' Harry said impatiently 'so you caught me. Suppose now you're bound tell the rest of them.'

'Don't be daft!'

'What ever you've got going on, if it's important enough to stop you from joining The Order, then we're not going to tell them.' George said.

'Right! However we do want in on it.' Fred said unabashedly.

'Absolutely. Anyway they made it quite clear in the meeting that we were not going to be allowed out in the field as Order members...'

'So basically we now hold the unofficial title of Order mascots.'

'Which is not what we signed up for, is it?' George swept into the room and crouched in front of the elves, studying them curiously. 'What happened to these two?'

'They're stuck together' said Ron flatly.

'Leave it to you to state the bleedin obvious' Fred walked over to Kreacher and pointed his wand at the elf. There was a flash of white light and a whooshing sound, and then Dobby and Kreacher broke apart scowling at one another.

'Well that's that! So what's going on then?' George said as he stood and faced Harry.

The trio exchanged looks before Harry slowly spoke 'Kreacher has been following Malfoy.'

'What?' Fred looked flummoxed as he looked back at Kreacher.

'Well ... where is the little toe rag?' asked George.

'I don't know, I was just about to ask before you came in.'

'Don't let us stop you.' Fred ushered Kreacher over to Harry. Harry felt it was a reasonable trade-off involving Fred and George in the news about Malfoy rather than giving them the real reason he had called Kreacher.

'Well Kreacher?' Harry said expectantly 'Where is he?'

'Kreacher cannot say.' the wrinkly little elf bowed extravagantly once more. 'Kreacher has been unable to follow the noble and handsome Draco all the way to his location.'

'The what?' George said dubiously.

'Never mind,' said Harry with a sigh, and then turning back to Kreacher he asked 'why?'

Kreacher lifted his head smugly 'because the stupid elf with clothes will not let me.'

Fred caught Dobby's arm as he tried to throw himself at Kreacher. 'Dobby is not stupid!' he squawked angrily, arms flailing madly. 'Kreacher cannot be trusted! Kreacher is a bad house elf!'

'Hang on, so have been following him or not?' Ron was looking extremely confused.

'Kreacher humbly follows in Draco's aristocratic wake when he is at Hogwarts.'

'Hogwarts?' Fred, George and Ron said in unison.

'Are you telling me that Draco is wandering around the school undetected ... whenever he feels like it?' Harry said doubtfully

'Kreacher did not say that.' he smiled slyly.

'Then tell me what he is doing there!' Harry said losing his patience with Kreacher. 'And I want you to be specific! How often ... and which rooms he goes to!'

'Master is cunning.' Kreacher's smug expression dissolved as he realized his game of verbal cat and mouse was over. 'Kreacher has been privileged to watch the dashing young Malfoy twice as he has made his way into the Headmasters office'

'He's been inside Dumbledore's office?' Hermione said as she stepped forward. Kreacher covered his ears to block her out but before he could say anything insulting Hermione leant down and yanked his arms away from the side of his head in frustration, her enormous patience with Kreacher had finally worn thin. 'What was he doing in there?' she demanded.



'The mudblood touched Kreacher-'

'*What was he doing in there?* Hermiones eyes blazed. Kreacher still did not acknowledge her.

'ANSWER HER!' Harry commanded furiously.

'He spoke with one of the portraits.' Kreacher bit back defeated and then with a *CRACK* he was gone.

'Dobby! Will you keep an eye on him for me? Don't try to stop him but watch him okay?'

'Dobby would be proud to do as you ask, Harry Potter!' Dobby answered, lifting his head to its full height, and with a *CRACK* he was gone too.

'What's all that noise up there?' Mrs. Weasleys voice echoed through the door.

'Just showing Harry one of our new Lung Buster Bubblegums!' Fred opened it a crack and yelled back as Socks darted through and down the stairs, apparently scared off by all the noise.

'For goodness sake! I've told you about chewing those in the house!' she yelled back 'All of you can come on down anyway. I'm serving up an early dinner now everyone's gone.'

They didn't get a chance to discuss any further the bombshell that Draco had been back to Hogwarts over the holidays. Lupin had left and Mr. Weasley was leaving on an assignment for the ministry the next morning and Mrs. Weasley insisted they spend the remaining time together as a family. She ignored the twin's obvious annoyance, mistakenly putting it down to their disappointment at not being asked to play an active roll in The Order.

Harry was distracted by the fact that he hadn't gotten around to asking Kreacher about the locket, and spent most of the evening in deep thought, offering a grunt in answer here and there when it was expected of him. Ron and Hermione valiantly tried several times to excuse themselves early in the hopes they could congregate in private somewhere else in the house, but Mrs. Weasley was having none of it. She was unusually determined to keep them all together.

When it was finally late enough to get away with it, Ginny announced her intentions to retire and brushed past Harry on her way up to bed. It seemed to him she had come unnecessarily close and it jolted him out of his state of self-imposed isolation, awakening in him that familiar need that only she could arouse, and only she could fill.

Yet instead of finding it a pleasant sensation Harry found it frustrating; he could not seek the fulfilment he so desperately craved and so when he finally retired to his own room he lay awake for what seemed like hours, his body tense and his mind a mess of images and emotions. Eventually he was wound up so tightly, he gave up on sleep and threw on his jeans. He sat on the bed and leaned himself on the window ledge, looking out at the frosted bluish light illuminating the street.

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Harry was gently roused by the smooth touch of warm hands on his bare shoulders.

The cool evening breeze drifted through the open space in the window as he lifted his head slowly from the crook of his arm on the windowsill. He closed his eyes again as he felt Ginny's soft lips on his neck. He wanted to lose himself in her, he wanted to bury his frustration and unleash the passion that ebbed through him. She let her hands find their way to his and he clasped them tightly, holding onto the feel of her body as she pressed it against his back.

'Don't turn me away again.' she whispered in his ear. An incredible ache racked through his body at her words, awakening a desire he could not control. He turned as he pulled her to him. Their lips met in a flare of passion, her breathing as ragged as his, her desire as complete. He eased her back on the bed as she bit at his bottom lip playfully, her hushed throaty laugh clearing his mind of everything except her.

Every nerve in him felt alive with her touch, and as he brought his body down on hers, she shuddered slightly, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck and kissing him longingly. Their lips were locked together as Harry swam in her caresses but a thought was growing in the back of

his mind. He tried to shut it out, increasing the pressure of his lips on hers, pressing his eyes tightly shut, but it refused to be denied.

Harry let out a low rumble in the back of his throat as he pulled his head up. He could see Ginny's glistening eyes in the moonlight as she tilted her head and frowned slightly, but Harry knew she was expecting him to pull away. He looked painfully into her eyes, wondering if she could understand. He could not voice the thought that had brought him to a grinding halt. He could not speak the words that lingered in his mind. But he would act on them because they could not be ignored.

Slowly Ginny sat up as Harry moved his body off her and made way for her to leave him, as he knew she would. She looked down at the bed covers unable to meet his gaze.

'I want to stay with you anyway,' her voice broke as the tears spilled down her cheeks. 'I don't care anymore' Harry lifted her chin gently 'I don't want to leave you.'

Harry wrapped his protective arms around her and held her to him as she wept silently, and finally when she was ready to return to her own bed, he kissed her tenderly, memorizing every curve of her lips.

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Their letters arrived a few days later and Harry felt some relief that Hogwarts would be reopening again this year. Now he knew Malfoy had been back to the castle he felt the overwhelming need to return there as well.

In the final weeks before school Ginny did not appear in Harry's room in the middle of the night. It was not as if there was no longer anything between them, but finally she seemed to accept Harry's choice to let her go, though he had to remind himself nightly why he had chosen to do so. Instead, Socks had kept him company most nights. She seemed to have adopted him, and Harry was becoming very attached to her, in fact some nights he found himself waiting to feel her familiar spring onto the bed and warm body curled against his before he would drift into a peaceful sleep. She was rarely about during the day though, and when he asked, Ginny had waved it off saying Socks was usually to be found in some nook of the house sleeping. Harry wondered vaguely at how much a cat could sleep.

Crookshanks appeared to pay no mind to Socks one way or the other, seemingly thoroughly uninterested when she padded into the room. On occasion Harry would discover her skulking around when he was alone with Ron and Hermione, and he would pick her up and play with her while thinking on what they would do next. Though for some reason Hermione seemed to be growing increasingly uncomfortable as she studied Harry toying with his playmate, eventually taking to searching the room and upon finding Socks, she would unceremoniously dump her outside the door before they were allowed to discuss anything, much to Harry's, and Socks's annoyance.

During their talks they had agreed that it was too risky to summon Kreacher back to Grimmauld Place. The disturbance that inevitably followed when he and Dobby were in a room together was much harder to explain away now that Fred and George had gone, so it was decided that Harry would wait until he was at Hogwarts to question him about the locket.

The day finally came for the trip to Diagon Alley for the years school supplies. With the growing threat from Voldemort's minions, and the fact that many students were not expected to return to school after the summer, McGonagall had arranged a day for the students and family's to visit Diagon Alley in relative safety to pick up their supplies while under the protection of the ministry aurors.

Mr. Weasley mused that the ministry was very keen to catch up with Harry after he had slipped through their grasp at The Burrow, returning to Grimmauld Place. Apparently Scrimgeour had launched into a red-faced rant when he had found out they had lost Harry, with Mr. Weasley himself coming under fire being accused of aiding and abetting Harry's "escape", but Mr. Weasley was able to confidently state that he was in no way able to tell the ministry where Harry was. This was of

course absolutely true as he was not the Orders secretkeeper.

For the first time, they were going to apparate into Diagon Alley as it seemed the quickest and safest way to travel now that they all had their licenses, except of course Ginny, who was extremely put out that she was going to be left behind.

'You don't need new robes Ginny, you've barely grown in size over the past year!' was all Mrs. Weasley would offer in way of comfort. Harry had immediately asked who was staying behind to guard her and Lupin had looked at him curiously, clear he hadn't thought it necessary. But the last thing Harry wanted was for Snape to pay a little visit while they were gone and find Ginny alone. Without voicing his real reasons why, Harry managed to convince Lupin that just because he wasn't there, didn't mean she wasn't in any danger, and under the helpful growingly indignant gaze of Mrs. Weasley, Lupin assigned Hestia to stay behind.

Sturgis and Tonks were gathered in the kitchen having already been enlisted for added protection, but they were not travelling with the Weasleys, rather they would go ahead first with Lupin, one at a time and position themselves so they could watch from a distance. Lupin seemed to think that an obvious presence of so many Order members gathered around the Weasleys would be akin to holding up a rather large neon sign saying HARRY POTTER IS HERE with a giant finger pointed at him. So it was that Lupin and the others left the kitchen with a series of loud cracks, followed a while later by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Harry and Hermione.

Harry was disappointed to note that Diagon Alley had become decidedly unfriendly over the past year. More shops than ever were closed and boarded up, and the little stalls that had sprung up were increasingly poorly erected and manned.

'Alright, we'll get you three fitted out for new uniforms, you don't need to buy robes; the ones you have should last you.' Mrs. Weasley said as her eyes darted around her 'Harry, where are you dear?' she added quietly.

'Here' he said as he moved to stand near her elbow. Lupin had taken Harry aside before they left and insisted he wear his invisibility cloak the whole time they were out, also advising him not to make contact with any friends he might come across in case someone was watching. Harry thought it strange but it seemed he was almost as worried about the aurors discovering Harry's presence as he was of Voldemort's cronies.

'Good. Stay right by us ... don't go wandering off or we'll lose you!'

As they moved along the street, the occasional huddle of people emerged from one of the few open stores. Harry noted that few of the students would have been below fourth year and he guessed that most of the young ones were being kept at home. Scowling at the enormity of impact Voldemort had on the wizarding community Harry had embraced so enthusiastically when he had been introduced to it, he made his way down the cobbled Alley.

What was once a warm and welcoming place had been reduced to a foreboding ghost town where the once happy and lively throng of people had become a trickle of frightened witches and wizards who constantly glanced over their shoulders. Harry couldn't stop the anger in him as it rose with every passing step. One maniac had been responsible for all of this. A madman who had become less than human in his effort to avoid death was bringing the world that Harry loved to it's knees.

They shuffled in the door of Madame Malkin's and were loaded up with new jumpers and shirts in no time. Once Mrs. Weasley had parted with several Galleons they headed to Flourish and Blotts, which must have closed since their previous visit but appeared to have been opened specially for the occasion. The windows were still boarded up making the interior very dank indeed, and dust that had been kicked up by billowing cloaks drifted in the sun's rays that had pierced the cracks between the planks of wood.

Harry stood near the stairwell trying to avoid bumping into anyone, and as he scrambled back to make way for two of the youngest students he had yet seen, he brushed a stack of disused books and dust swirled up under the confines of his cloak and attacked his mouth and nose.

He sneezed loudly three times in rapid succession and as he looked up, eyes watering madly, Mr.

and Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and Ron all stood gawping at the space where Harry was standing, and they were not the only ones. Nearby witches and wizards had stopped in mid act of rifling through books, automatically grabbing their children and staring wide-eyed at the non-apparent source of noise.

'Hehe... well now ...' Mr. Weasley recovered first. 'Ron, I told you not to bring your rat in here,' Mr. Weasley was a terrible liar. Nervously he turned to the increasing hub of people watching 'gets terribly allergic ... very old you see ... Mmm...' he added lamely.

'Right' said Ron unconvincingly, then gaining confidence in the excuse he looked over his shoulder 'Sorry ...' and bent down in mock search 'I'll just get him.' and proceeded to lift up books and peer round shelves as people started looking away again.

'That was too close!' Harry said under his breath as Ron reached him, though he noted that one or two wizards looked thoroughly unconvinced.

'Yeah, I think you might be better to wait outside.' Ron said as he continued to half-heartedly look for his non-existent rat.

'I think you're right' and Harry headed past him, making his way to the door. He dodged around it before it closed shut and stood in the street waiting for the others.

He watched as people approached and hurried on down the street, wondering why he hadn't spotted any aurors yet. Maybe they were all hidden under cloaks like he was, but he doubted it as he was pretty sure they didn't have that many invisibility cloaks at their disposal. He started searching more earnestly for some sign of them, looking in the tiny darkened alleys between shops and even scanning the rooftops as he walked slowly around in a circle. Suddenly he was knocked off his feet and he hit the ground with a thud, his cloak underneath him and something lying on top of him.

'Neville!' he croaked as he tried to heave his friend off him.

Neville looked startled as he scrambled to pick himself up, eyeing Harry apologetically 'Sorry Harry! Didn't see you there...'

'Yes, well that was the whole point' said Harry exasperated, pulling himself off the ground looking at Neville's anguished face.

'I'm really sorry, Harry!'

'It wasn't your fault, I wasn't watching where I was going' he added, swinging his cloak over his head. But before he could cover himself with it, it was ripped from his hands and he was being thrust face first to the ground. 'GET OFF!' he yelled as he struggled to get his hands free. He could hear Neville's urgently high voice.

'Let Go!'

Harry, his heart pounding, squirmed under the body that was pressing down on him. He managed to twist onto his back and finally pulled his hands free. Automatically his left fist made contact with his assailant's face and his right hand found his wand. '*Levicorpus!*' With lightening speed he had raised the man off him and dangled him in the air by his ankle.

'Give me that...' An angry voice said and Harry spun onto his knees.

'*Stupefy!*' he shot at a wizard who was struggling with Neville's wand hand, trying to disarm him. The flash of light hit the man's chest and his eyes curled backwards into his head as he was thrown off his feet by the force of the curse.

Then several things happened all at once.

A woman who was coming out of Flourish and Blotts started screaming, battling her way back against people who pushed forward out the doors to see what was happening; the man who dangled in the air was spluttering threateningly at Harry as blood dripped from his nose; and many loud *CRACKS* resounded in the street around Harry and Neville signifying the arrival of a number of apparitors.

Harry, who was spinning around on his feet, wand directed straight out in front of him looking for

someone to target, suddenly threw himself at Neville, and pushed him to the ground as several jets of red light soared past them. He aimed a curse at one of the wizards that now surrounded him as he scrambled to his feet, but he felt a white hot jolt in his back that threw him forward. His body skidded along the ground but he still had his wand arm free. *Impedimenta!*

Without speaking as he struggled to catch his breath after being winded, he sent a curse that caught the man approaching him off guard, his body stiffening. Harry groggily picked himself up, his eyes watering from the pain, trying desperately to locate Neville and see if he was all right, but before he could straighten his body two blasts pelted excruciatingly into his side, hurling him off his feet, his head hitting the cobbled stones with a sickening crunch.

Harry heard Lupins voice roaring furiously ... he felt the breath leave his lungs and then everything went black...

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry's body felt stiff and sore when he finally opened his eyes. His head swam as he tried to sit up, everything blurred and the pain shot through his skull so he let his head drop back down onto the thin pillow. He kept his eyes closed as nausea threatened to overcome him. *What happened?*

He tried but he couldn't remember what had brought him to this point. As he clutched his head he felt a lumpy wet patch above his left eye, he pulled his hand away and squinted at it, the blurry image of his fingers was smeared with blood. That explained why his head was spinning at least. But why wasn't it bandaged? Why hadn't someone fixed it already?

A sense of urgency grew in him. Something was terribly wrong. With his eyes only half open and his head feeling like it was splitting in two, Harry slowly eased himself off the bed onto his feet. Nausea swept through him again as the blood left his head, and the darkness that had barely retreated closed in on him. He staggered briefly, unable to focus on anything to stop the spinning, his head feeling like it would explode, but even as he fought the urge to throw up, he dropped to the floor and sank into oblivion.

~\*~\*~\*~

Something was lifting him up; strong hands were dragging him as he tried to open his eyes but his head pounded so much that he felt sick. He could hear voices but they seemed very distant and he could not make out what they were saying. He was hoisted into a sitting position on a soft platform; his head feeling like his skull was crushing in on him as someone tapped his face.

*'Harry! Harry wakeup! Wakeup Harry!'* it echoed in his head painfully and suddenly he convulsed, throwing his chest forward he lost the contents of his stomach. There were angry voices as Harry's body went limp again; being held up only by arms clutching at his shoulders. He felt so incredibly tired and the pain in his head was so severe that he wished these people would just let him sleep.

There was an argument raging somewhere in the room as Harry hung his head and waited to blackout again. *'Harry! Wakeup!'* that annoying voice said again as he felt a hand tapping his cheek *'Harry! Don't fall asleep!'* but even as the voice spoke, Harry willed the approaching darkness to take him away.

Then someone put a hand under his chin and held his head up, something was thrust against his lips and hot liquid dripped out of the sides of his mouth and down the back of his throat as he spluttered and choked on it..

The drowsiness that had lurked comfortably near was ebbing away rapidly and the pounding in his head grew more and more real until he felt like he could bear it no longer. He swiped out at the cup and heard it crash to the ground.

*'It's alright Harry ... it will help you to stay awake'*

*'I don't want to stay awake'* he croaked still unable to open his eyes for the pain. *'I know,'* the voice softened *'Someone's coming to fix you Harry ... but you need to stay awake until they get here'* Harry groaned in protest. *'It won't be long ... I promise...'*

Harry realized who was talking to him *'Lupin?'* he still could not open his eyes or hold his head up to see.

*'Yes'*

Harry wanted to talk to him, he wanted to ask what had happened and how he came to be here, but the pounding in his head was becoming all consuming. *'I need to lay down'*

*'It should be alright, he's had the potion so he won't lose consciousness.'* Tonks's voice sounded strained. He felt himself being lowered and once his head was on the pillow some of the thunderous pain eased. Harry tried to open his eyes but immediately felt sick again as the light swirled above him, so he closed them and lay there listening.

*'They should have Scrimgeour's head on a stick for this!'* Tonks sounded extremely angry. *'I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself.'*

*'He shouldn't have attacked us'* a male voice Harry vaguely recognized replied

*'What did you expect?'* Tonks's said so loudly that Harry closed his arms over his face to try to quell the noise *'I mean honestly ... what did you think he would do ... creeping up behind him and wrestling him to the ground ... your lucky all he did was hang you upside down!'*

*'Tonks!'* Lupin butted in. Harry's memory of the incident was starting to come back to him.

*'Neville'* he groaned *'Is he-'*

*'fine, he's just fine'* Lupin said soothingly.

A short time later a woman arrived and after a brisk greeting Harry felt her slender hands on his face. *'Why wasn't this seen to straight away?'* she said gravely.

*'These idiots wouldn't let us in to see him!'* Tonks said *'He was lying on the floor when we came in.'* she said darkly

*'Totally unacceptable! I will be lodging a formal complaint with the Ministry the minute I get back to St Mungos!'* the woman said business like as she took her hands from Harry. He felt a gentle warmth on his forehead that gradually grew into an uncomfortable prickly heat, but the pounding in his head was slowly receding until it was no more than a dull ache.

Eventually the sensation stopped and the woman told Harry to open his eyes. He opened them cautiously and was pleasantly surprised to note that everything had finally stopped spinning, though he still couldn't focus on anything.

*'How's that ... better?'* she asked him. He lifted himself onto his elbow and turned to look at her as something was thrust into his hand. That's why he still couldn't focus, he thought as he slid his glasses over his nose. The room and the people in it swayed gently, but it was not enough to make him feel sick.

*'Yeah, much better. Thanks.'* She nodded at him satisfied and instructed him to stay in bed until morning.

Lupin followed her and spoke to her quietly outside the room as she left, before coming back and sitting down on the edge of Harry's bed. The man Harry now recognized as the one he had punched on the nose and hung upside down in Diagon Alley, was standing just inside the doorway, studying the three of them nervously. Over his shoulder hovered a small black orb. Harry looked away in disgust. Scrimgeour had sent the Stalker to keep an eye on them, was he so afraid of what they might do? The cold room was bare except for the bed he now sat on and a small table that was propped against a pale green wall.

*'You're in one of the ministry's holding cells'* Lupin said watching him.

Harry gave Lupin a stony look *'Are they going to let me out?'*

*'They can't keep you here, Harry.'* Lupin said *'If people find out the ministry's holding the "Chosen One" in their jail cells there will be a massive outcry, Scrimgeour can be sure of that.'* He said as he looked over at the Stalker *'But as you are not well enough to be moved, you'll stay here for the night anyway-'*

'No' Harry cut him off 'I feel fine and I want out of here!'  
Lupin looked down at the floor gravely 'Harry, I don't think you realize how close you came to-'  
'I'm fine now.' Harry abruptly.

'I can understand why he doesn't want to stay' Tonks said with a raised eyebrow. Lupin gave him an appraising look.

'You'd have to walk all the way to the Atrium before we can leave Harry.'  
'Not a problem.' Harry felt weak but his need to leave here was greater.  
'We're in the furthest part of the ministry' Lupin added.  
'Doesn't matter.'

'Molly will be relieved to see him' Tonks added.

'You'd have to go straight to your own bed when we got back' Lupin said.  
'Happily.' Harry sounded anything but happy.

'See, we just need to decide how are we going to take him' Tonks said confidently.

'I suppose we could go via the floo, I don't think you're up to apparating.'

'Fine' said Harry.

'All right' Lupin said resignedly, standing up 'I'll go and speak to Scrimgeour. I'll be back soon.' and he turned and left, Tonks smiling after him.

'I'll head back to let them know you're coming, Harry' she said and followed him out the door.

Harry had found the walk to the Atrium much more tiresome than he had expected. By the time he stepped into the kitchen at Grimmauld place after the whirling trip through the floo network, his head was hurting so much he was wincing with the pain again. But he was glad to be back.

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley were looking at him in shock but they both gave him overly tight hugs before Mrs. Weasley sent him straight upstairs with watery eyes. Ron looked extraordinarily pale as he accompanied Harry up to his room. Harry sat on the bed with his head in his hands. It was feeling like it might burst at any minute so Ron closed the curtains and then left, closing the door behind him.

'You've got an interesting relationship with the ministry, haven't you?'  
Harry looked up in surprise. Ginny was walking towards him with a crooked smile on her face.

'Where'd you come from?'

'I was waiting for you' she said as she sat beside him and lifted her hand to his forehead to inspect the damage. Harry hadn't seen her when he came in. He was about to mention the fact when Ginny spoke again.

'It doesn't look too bad now,' she dropped her eyes to his 'though from what Hermione said, you were in pretty bad shape for a while.'

'How would she know?'

'Tonks told her they found you on the floor, lying unconscious in a pool of blood.' Ginny was frowning slightly as she stood up looking at his shirt. For the first time Harry noticed the dark patch of dried blood on the shoulder. So that explained why Mrs. Weasley and Hermione had looked so shocked and the blood had drained from Ron's face.

'Here' Ginny handed Harry the basin which normally sat below the mirror. He rested it on his knees as she dipped the small towel in and wiped the dried blood from his face and neck. As he sat there enjoying the sensation of Ginny's touch he thought how he could have used the Tergeo charm to remove the blood, but he found this way much more pleasant so he allowed Ginny to clean him up and strip him of his old shirt, replacing it with a black t-shirt she had once told him suited him very much. Then she told him to lie down and promptly left him before Mrs. Weasley brought in a tray of dinner.

She showed some surprise at Harry's cleaned up appearance but said nothing before telling him she

would bring him up a light sleeping draught later. Even though Harry's head still ached, he was rather hungry so he finished off the steak and kidney pie before placing the tray on the floor, and then leaned back on his stack of pillows feeling very thankful he wasn't in the cell at the ministry.

It may have been paranoia about Death Eaters that had triggered off the events that led him to the ministry cells, but what other reaction did they expect? You don't grab someone from behind and throw them on the ground unless you're expecting a fight! What were they playing at? There was a knock at the door and Lupin entered.

'You're looking better.'

'What happened? Why did they jump me in the first place?' was out of Harry's mouth before he had even sat up properly.

'Because they're idiots.' said Tonks as she appeared from behind Lupin.

Lupin couldn't help but smile 'Yes, well ... that does certainly seem to play a part in all this.' then he pulled up a chair as Tonks plonked herself down on Harry's bed.

'Starring role if you ask me.' she looked sideways at Harry.

'They were under orders to detain you if they found you, Kingsley warned me yesterday.' Lupin sighed.

'What? Why?' Harry said, feeling his temper rise.

'Since the ministry lost contact with you they have been under a barrage of public pressure to ... produce you.' Harry looked at Lupin in angry bewilderment 'It didn't take long for the rumours to start that you were not missing ... but dead.'

'Stupid gits almost killed you trying to prove you were alive!' Tonks rolled her eyes.

'So they watched for you at Diagon Alley and when Neville knocked you over and your cloak came off, the two closest aurors moved in. They tried to stop you from putting your cloak back on, and the scuffle that ensued brought the rest of them down on top of you.' Lupin said gravely.

'So they thought that the best thing to do would be to leave me to rot in one of their cells?' Harry said through his teeth.

'Prats!' said Tonks.

'They're afraid of you Harry,' Lupin said quietly. Harry scoffed as Lupin went on to explain 'they never expected you to be so ... hard to detain. They had no idea how skilled you are, so when they realized they had nearly killed you trying to defend themselves, they panicked. They got you back to the ministry and in the holding cell before I could see how much damage they had done.'

'Arrrgh! I am so sick of it!' Harry didn't try to hide his fury 'If Scrimgeour gets in my way one more time I'm gonna-'

'I don't think that will be a problem anymore.' Lupin interrupted.

'Why should he stop now? He doesn't strike me as the type to give up that easily.' Harry said resentfully.

'Because you have him over a barrel, Harry. If you were to tell people what happened he wouldn't last ten more minutes in his office.' Lupin stood up 'Imagine the Minister of Magic almost doing Voldemort's job for him.' a sad smile played across his lips.

After they left Harry thought about what was said. He hoped Lupin had been right and that it would be the end of the Ministries interference. He would be heading back to Hogwarts the day after tomorrow and he had no idea what was in store for him after that. The last thing he needed was the Ministry trying to track him down wherever he went.

His head still ached and there was a dull ringing in his ears from the pain when Mrs. Weasley came in briefly to give Harry a sleeping draft, not leaving until he had drank it all down. He really didn't mind having some help to shut out the pain, and it wasn't long before he was feeling very light headed indeed.

Eventually the draft seeped through him and he could feel no pain at all, so he closed his eyes and enjoyed drifting lightly between states of consciousness. He felt something hop on his bed and he immediately grinned, thinking that Socks had come to keep him company yet again. But when he opened his eyes Ginny was sat on the side of his bed looking down at him, smiling.

'What are you grinning at?' she laughed playfully.



'You' he said with an even broader smile.

'Really!' her eyes sparkled.

'I'd take you over Socks any day.' he felt blissfully intoxicated as he reached his hand up and brushed her hair back off her face.

'Is that so?' she chuckled.

'Yeah, but don't tell her I said that.' he said softly.

'Oh, somehow I don't think she'd mind.'

Harry gazed up at the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. 'I'm going to marry you one day, Ginny Weasley.'

'You fool,' she laughed softly 'it's the potion mum gave you, your completely out of your head.'

'And what a wonderful place it is,' he said dreamily.

Ginny's smile saddened slightly as she looked down at his mouth 'It'll be over one day Harry,' her finger brushed across his lips as he opened them to kiss it gently 'one day you'll be free.'

He leant up on his elbow and kissed her softly on the lips 'I'll never be free' he whispered, then he bent his head and grazed his lips on her neck 'not from you.'

'I wish you would say that to me some other time.' she barely spoke but Harry was close enough to hear it.

He breathed her in, feeling even more intoxicated by her scent. He kissed Ginny's neck lightly again before looking at her drowsily through heavy eyelids, expecting to meet the same desire in her eyes, but she was looking at him with a smile on her face, highly amused at something.

'C'mon lover boy, I think it's time you went to sleep!' and she pushed him back down on the pillow, curling into his body beside him. Harry hung his arm over her and nuzzled into her slender neck.

She chuckled lightly to herself as he brushed his lips over her skin, thoroughly enjoying himself, though he had no idea what she found so amusing. Before long he had trouble keeping his head off the pillow, so he relaxed back and as Ginny turned in the crook of his arm to face him, he opened his eyes for just long enough to see a tear drop to the gentle smile on her lips. Before he had time to register it, he was gone.

## **9. An End To Division and a New Position for Harry**

Harry spent the next day rather uncomfortably.

For the first time he was glad to have the distraction of getting all of his gear washed and packed into his trunk ready for the following day. He was acutely aware of how he had behaved towards Ginny under the influence of Mrs. Weasleys so-called "light sleeping draft". What was worse, he remembered everything he had said to her. A couple of times he caught her looking at him with a slight smile playing across her lips, but she tactfully said nothing.

The next morning they all piled into Ministry cars and headed to Kings Cross Station. Although Harry was loathed to have anything to do with the Ministry, Mr. Weasley had made it clear before he had left for work that they were under instruction from Kingsley, and should prove quite manageable. Harry was sat in a car separate from the others, squished uncomfortably in the backseat between two of the biggest aurors he had ever seen, Kingsley Shacklebolt was in the passenger seat.

Harry sat, shoulders scrunched into his body and his legs uncomfortably pushed together; his escorts knees splayed out because their incredibly huge thighs made it impossible for them to close their legs any further. Kingsley had seemed quite amused by their size and cast Harry an exaggerated look that suggested he thought they were quite as ridiculous as Harry did.

He noted the main foyer of the station was as busy as usual as they wheeled all their trunks behind them. Glancing at the surrounding stalls, Harry stopped suddenly, causing the auror trailing behind him to fall over his trolley. Harry heard the auror swearing over the clatter of his luggage as it spilled onto the tiled floor but he paid no attention; he walked slowly up to the stand where a newspaper headline had caught his eye and picked up a copy of the paper. On the front page was a picture of what might have been a town once with the headline

### **TORNADO TEARS THROUGH TROWBRIDGE**

*Residents of the close-knit community of Trowbridge, just outside of Bath, are this morning at a loss to explain the overnight devastation of their town. Emergency services were called out around 3 am after an anonymous call was placed that a tornado had struck the tiny town and flattened almost everything in its path. Casualties are as yet unknown. Meteorologists who were responsible for monitoring the weather bands at the time say that their instruments showed no sign of any weather disturbance and are adamant that no such thing could have occurred.*

*'I challenge the twits to come down here and say that!' angry local, Guthrey Pudderwell told us this morning. Mr. Pudderwell had fortunately spent the night unconscious in a barn outside the town limits after having difficulty finding his way home the previous evening. He was unable to give us any further details of the storm, however Mr. Pudderwell assured us that it must have been a windy night because on his stagger back from The Pig and Whistle, (a local drinking establishment), he had somehow misplaced his hat.*

*Unfortunately our efforts to interview other locals have been hampered by Emergency Officials who have kept everyone out of the site until it is deemed safe to enter...*

Harry lowered the paper. Hermione, who had been reading the article over his shoulder, voiced what he had been thinking 'Giants!'

Ron, who had just joined them, grabbed the paper from Harry's hands and read it.

'They've started already.' Harry said gravely as he looked at Hermione 'How do you fight things that are twenty feet high and have a natural resistance to magic?'

'I don't know' Hermione said frowning with concern 'but I think we need to pay Hagrid a visit as soon as we can. Maybe he'll know something?'

'I don't think fighting them is going to be an option.' Ron said darkly returning the newspaper to the stand as a grumpy assistant looked on.

'What d'ya mean?' Harry frowned.

Ron shrugged slightly and shook his head 'I don't know, just a thought.' he said dismissively.

'Come on!' Mrs. Weasley had doubled back when she realized they were no longer following her 'You've got seven minutes before the train leaves, now move it!' she waved them on hurriedly.

After a very strained and teary farewell from Mrs. Weasley, they boarded the train with the two enormous aurors carrying Pig and Hedwig in tow, followed by Kingsley. They made their way slowly along the narrow passageway, and as they passed, Harry peered into the cabins, and though Ministry guards who stood just inside the doorways blocked some compartments; others Harry could see into, appeared full.

'Right you lot!' a gruff voiced man who was tall and hairy and outfitted in ministry guard robes, was standing down the opposite end of the corridor waving his arms about like he was on a tarmac attempting to land a plane, 'in 'ere' A few doubtful looking fourth year Ravensclaws shuffled into a compartment, as the door was closed behind them. 'Rest of you ... this way.' he headed through the connect doors into the next carriage.

As they dragged their trunks behind them everyone in the corridor lurched forward when the train finally left the platform. Harry watched as people were sorted. He picked out Neville and Luna entering a compartment with some sixth year Hufflepuffs, and also spotted Colin and Dennis Creevey joining some other students he didn't know. They were all compartmentalized gradually until just the four of them and two very small first years, were left.

'You lot can take this one!' the gruff voiced man barred their way and opened the compartment door.

As Harry waited for Ron, Hermione and Ginny to pile in before him, Kingsley called to him from behind the two massive aurors. 'I'll be up the other end. I'll leave these two here with you.' he raised an eyebrow comically, peering over one of their shoulders at Harry, then disappeared behind the hulk as he walked away. Once inside Harry stowed his gear, relieving the guards of their cages and slouching down in between Ron and one of the small boys sitting by the window. His brown

curls gave his already pink-cheeked freckly face an even younger appearance.

The other boy who sat opposite had black hair and very low set eyebrows and looked thoroughly uninterested as he sat staring out the window. The train rattled along and Harry watched as the curly haired boys eyes roamed around the cabin, stopping on Hermione and Ginny, the colour in his cheeks rising when Ginny looked up and smiled at him. Harry smiled to himself as the boy looked away nervously, continuing on to Ron who had his attention on Pig, and then finally Harry. The boy's lips curled in a brief smile as he met Harry's gaze, then his eyes did the flick up to his scar.

Predictably his face changed immediately, draining of all colour; even his freckles seemed to pale as he gaped open-mouthed, seemingly unable to look away. The dark haired boy noticed the change in his companion and turned his head to look at Harry. His eyebrows lowered even more and his beady eyes glittered as his mouth curled downwards into a furious pout. He stood up abruptly and with all eyes on him, he crossed to the door and flung it open.

'You there!' he said rudely as he peered round the enormous guard. 'I'm not staying in here with him!' he said as he pointed at Harry 'You're going to have to move me!'

'What's all this about?' the gruff man strode into view

'Him!' he looked accusingly at Harry 'I'm not staying in here with him!'

'And why not?'

The boy scowled in wonderment 'because he's the "Chosen One", he's the one The Dark Lord's after. I don't want to be caught in the crossfire when he gets attacked!' he said indignantly. Harry and Ron exchanged glances as Ginny scoffed and shook her head.

The man looked at Harry briefly and sighed 'You're not movin, everyone stays where they are. Now get back to your seat before I set one of these two on you.' He waved a finger at Harry's escort and turned away, the conversation clearly over.

The boy turned around red faced and paced back to his seat. He plonked himself back down next to Hermione with an angry sigh and folded his arms across the front of him as he went back to staring out of the window. This time however, he looked anything but disinterested. As the houses and landscape flew by, he appeared to be looking very intently for any sign of an impending affront on the compartment containing Harry Potter.

'Well, isn't this nice' Hermione said looking around as their eyes flitted from one person to another.

'Yeah, right cosy little group' Ginny said eyeing the dark haired boy.

'There's one upside ... no prefect duties!' Ron smiled at Hermiones disapproving look.

The train journey was proving monotonous beyond compare and because no one was allowed to leave their compartments to mix with friends it meant that Harry, Ron and Hermione were unable to talk in private. Harry resigned himself to flipping through *Quidditch Quips and Clueless Commentary!* An amusing little handbook Ron had bought in Flourish and Blotts. It was bound in leather and gold leaf and was filled with quotable quotes from some of the most famous people in the league, as well as some other less memorable folk who had made it in because of their game steeling commentary. Harry turned each page half expecting to come across something of Luna's efforts from last year.

After they had donned their robes, the train grumbled to an uneventful halt, and they all piled out heading down to the awaiting carriages. Hagrid was not there to greet the first years for only the second time since Harry had been at Hogwarts. It wasn't surprising though considering there were so few of them, so Hermione appointed herself to shuffle them along the platform to the awaiting transport.

It was then that Harry really noticed the difference in the number of students to previous years. In the full moonlight, it was easy to see that the usual mass of heads bobbing up and down as they descended the stairs had been reduced to around a hundred and fifty, and few, as Harry had suspected, were below fourth year.

Harry went up to an awaiting Thestral and gave it a pat on the nose. It stared out at him through its ghostly white eyes as it nudged his palm. 'My last ride with you,' He said quietly. He then joined Neville, Luna, Ron and Hermione as they sat waiting to leave. As his guard positioned themselves,

one up front on the would-be drivers platform, and one standing on the stoop at the back, Harry looked around the carriage. 'Where's Ginny?'

'Oh, she went to sit with Seamus and Lavender.' Luna said 'I see Dean's back as well. He wasn't too sure if he would be returning, you know.' Harry tensed as she looked at Ron 'I overheard him at your place telling Ginny that he didn't really see the point in coming back. Of course, she was quite adamant that he should return.' Harry felt his stomach drop painfully as the carriages started along the road. 'Looks like she managed to talk him round. He certainly looked pleased with himself about something.' She added dreamily.

As Luna spoke, a painful heaviness grew in Harry's chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He stared out the window to avoid the looks he knew Hermione would be throwing him. So Ginny had wanted Dean to come back. She had convinced him it would be worth it. The thought made him sick. Along with the hurt, Harry's temper started to rise.

Is that what she had found so amusing when she was in his bed? Had she been thinking about Dean then? Harry brought his elbow up to rest on the window ledge and rubbed his fingers on his forehead. He thought about what he had said to her and swallowed hard, trying to ease the rising heat in him. Luna spoke almost non-stop on their way into the Hogwarts grounds with Ron, Hermione and Neville, who seemed to be aware of the tension, offering only stunted answers.

Hogwarts looked much more welcoming than it had when Harry had come at the beginning of summer, but he passed it by and moved into the Great Hall without registering it.

'Harry!' Seamus came up from behind and as Harry turned automatically, his eyes fell on Ginny who had strode in with Dean, both of them smiling as they came up behind Seamus.

'Yeah?' Harry said still watching Ginny and Dean.

'It's good to see you. I didn't expect you'd be here this year after the rumours.' Seamus patted Harry's shoulder.

'I bet your not the only one.' Harry was glaring at Dean who was laughing at something Ginny had said.

'Is everything alright?' Seamus asked.

Harry tore his eyes away, annoyed at himself 'Fine Seamus ... how was your holiday?' Harry forced himself to concentrate on what Seamus was saying as they crossed the large gap between the entrance door and the tables which were much shorter than usual, with only enough seating for a quarter of the usual Hogwarts intake. As he sat himself right at the farthest end, Seamus sat next to him and Ron plonked himself opposite. Hermione was looking up at the staff table as she sat herself next to Ron.

'Hagrids not here.' Hermione said frowning. They all turned to look at the long staff table up at the head of the Hall. Harry's eyes dropped to Ginny who had sat down next to Lavender and Dean.

'I wonder where he is then?' Ron said 'Did he say anything to you?'

'No,' Harry looked back at Hagrids empty chair. 'Who have they got for Defence Against the Dark Arts?' Harry could see Professor Sprout and Flitwick. Slughorn was also there chatting to Professor McGonagall and Madame Pomphrey.

Just then Professor McGonagall rose from her chair and silenced the chatter. She looked around at the students for a moment, before beginning.

'Welcome back to Hogwarts, such as it is. For those few of you who are here for the first time, I extend a welcoming hand from all of our staff and older students, I am sure they will help you to settle in under the rather unusual circumstances we find ourselves in.' Harry looked around, the first years were sitting together at the foot of the Hufflepuff table. Harry frowned and began searching for the sorting hat. He caught Slughorn's eye and received a knowing wink before McGonagall continued.

'For the first time in Hogwarts history, there will be no sorting of the first years to begin the feast.' A loud murmur erupted throughout the Hall as Harry exchanged looks with Ron and Hermione. Professor McGonagall raised a hand and waited for quiet. 'Amongst other changes being made for this year at least, our staff has been reduced, and your lessons will combine all students within your

year who are taking the same subject. You will be made aware of the full changes tomorrow morning after breakfast when you receive your new timetables. Also' McGonagall seemed to hesitate for the longest time before continuing 'there will be new sleeping arrangements explained to you after dinner.'

Everyone abandoned any pretence of hush and they all started talking rapidly amongst themselves. McGonagall looked out at the din over her spectacles, but she did not try to quell the noise. The other teachers were exchanging knowing glances as Harry looked back at Hermione and Ron who were talking along with everyone else.

'You mean they're going to mix the houses?' Ron asked, seemingly horrified at the thoughts of it. 'Well it makes sense when you consider how few students and staff there are.' She pointed out. 'But they cant do that! That means we'll be sharing passwords and ...' Ron was trying to find the words 'and ... everything.' He finally said.

'So long as we don't have to share with Slytherin, I don't care.' Seamus said darkly. Hermione frowned slightly at him.

'I don't think it would be such a bad thing.'

'What?' Ron accidentally knocked over his empty goblet. 'You're joking aren't you?'

'No,' she said seriously and before Ron could say anything else she put her finger to her lips and turned back to McGonagall.

'There are still a couple of items that need to be covered. Firstly, there will be no Quidditch this year.' There were multiple loud groans, especially from the Gryffindor table, though Harry, Ron and Ginny, sat in silence 'And we will not be appointing any new Prefects as I see enough have returned to adequately perform the required duties.' There were a couple of quietly disappointed groans from the Ravenclaw table. 'However, the time is right to inform you of your new Head Boy and Girl.

Harry noticed Hermione tense and a small smile crept across his lips. He knew how much she wanted this and figured she was a shoo-in. Ron on the other hand looked down at the table frowning to himself. Harry wondered if Ron really wanted the job after all. Even though he had basked in the glory of being a Prefect in the beginning, he wasn't exactly keen on the duties that came with it, and this year especially, being Head Boy would probably involve even more of the sort of work Ron liked to avoid. Harry looked back at McGonagall.

'This year, we are pleased to announce our new Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger,' Hermione exhaled and her shoulders relaxed almost immediately. Harry could tell she was holding back an enormous grin and he was most impressed at her composure considering what must have been going on inside 'and Head Boy, Mr. Harry Potter.'

Harry had been watching Hermione but at the mention of his name his head swung round to look at McGonagall. He sat bewildered for a moment, then looked back to Hermione as if waiting for her to tell him it was a mistake, but she was smiling encouragingly at him, Ron grinning next to her.

What just happened?

Harry was frowning; he was trying to get his head around what McGonagall said, when someone started to clap. As Harry looked round at Ginny, who was smiling and clapping her hands gently, others started to join in. Slowly at first, but then the applause grew, and before he could speak what was on his mind the whole room, bar a few Slytherins and the dark haired first year, was clapping loudly and enthusiastically.

Harry looked back at Hermione. Her eyes looked slightly watery as she flushed, but she showed no sign of the shock he had expected. Harry felt intensely awkward. It hadn't occurred to him that he would be in the running for Head Boy as he wasn't a Prefect, and there was no way he could accept the position because he had no idea how long he would even be at Hogwarts. As the applause died down Professor McGonagall spoke once more.

'We will now begin the feast.' and as usual, huge dishes piled high with delicious looking food appeared on the tables before them.

As everyone tucked in Harry leaned over his plate. 'What does she mean by making me Head Boy?'

he said in a half whisper to Ron and Hermione.

'You're the obvious choice mate.' Ron said happily as he brandished a chicken leg 'They couldn't have picked a better person.'

'That's right, Harry' Hermione was spooning corn onto her plate 'you are intelligent, compassionate, and you're a natural leader.' She stopped and looked at him 'I don't know why you're so surprised' Harry was looking at them as if they knew something he didn't. Seamus spoke up.

'I know I'd rather have you as Head Boy than anyone else' he said 'especially with things the way they are.'

'Me too,' Neville and Luna had been listening to the conversation 'You are the best man for the job Harry, and I'm really glad you decided to come back.' Neville said earnestly.

Harry didn't know what to say. He was heartened by their faith in him but he couldn't very well tell them that he probably wouldn't be staying for long; that would lead to too many questions. So he lifted a couple of lamb cutlets onto his plate and resigned himself to having a private conversation with Professor McGonagall when he could.

'Strange McGonagall didn't mention who the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Teacher is' Luna said, opening her protruding eyes. There was much speculation throughout the meal about who it might be. And Professor McGonagall came over briefly to give Harry the new password to the Common Room, though when he tried to engage her about his position as Head Boy, she held her hand up and told him whatever he had to say, it could wait. After all the pudding plates vanished, the students settled, whispering expectantly about the new sleeping arrangements. As McGonagall stood, a hush spread through the Hall.

'The sleeping arrangements have been made with everybody's best interests in mind, so no further discussions will be entered into.' Eyes were darting this way and that at McGonagall's ominous tone. It seemed very strange that they would not be siphoning off as usual to their houses.

'All students fifth year and below will be housed in the Ravenclaw Chambers' there was a murmur and a turning of heads. 'All students from the sixth and seventh years, will reside in the Gryffindor Tower.' Harry sat quietly as all of the older students, including the Slytherins exchanged incredulous looks. It was as he had suspected.

The Ravenclaw chambers were high up in the castle, therefore better protected and harder for outsiders to get to. And with the older students in the Gryffindor tower on the fourth floor, they had a tactical advantage should the Castle be infiltrated. Although he was not looking forward to sharing his beloved home with Slytherins, he understood the decision, so he remained quiet while McGonagall waited for the angry whispers to subside.

'All of your belongings will be waiting for you in your respective Common Rooms when you retire for the evening...' McGonagall launched into the usual spin about the Dark Forest and Mr. Filches banned substances, then they were dismissed.

Harry led the way, with Hermione bringing up the rear to ensure that everyone knew where they were supposed to go. He reached the portrait of the fat lady and was about to give her the password, when she raised her eyebrows at the site of them and said sternly...

'I don't want any funny business going on behind these walls now that you are all in together. You're going to have to learn to get along.' She pointed her finger at them 'Even if you realize it or not, its for your own good, and I for one, will be keeping an eye on you.' She lowered an eyebrow and looked down her nose at the Scowling Slytherins.

'Chizpurfle' said Harry.

'You took the word right out of my mouth' she sighed as she swung open to admit them.

Everyone milled around his or her trunks that were piled around the Common Room. Hermione wove her way to Harry and said quietly 'we're going to have to sort them out. I've counted about seventy of us all together.'

Harry looked about him, trying to gauge how many of each house they had. It appeared there were less Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs than Gryffindors and Slytherins, so Harry made a decision.

'The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff sixth years can bunk in together, everyone else can take a room for your year and house.' he spoke over the chatter.

'How come we have to share?' a disgruntled voice came from the crowd.

'Because there aren't enough rooms to go around.' Hermione chipped in impatiently 'And there are fewer of you than the other houses.'

'Well that's hardly a reason, is it? I think we should draw straws' came an indignant voice. Harry saw Ernie MacMillan turn on the outspoken Ravenclaw.

'You'll do as your told!' he said just as indignantly. A general argument broke out, centred around Ernie and the Ravenclaw, everyone seemed to think they should not be the ones sharing. Harry stood on his trunk and took out his wand. A noisy spray of red sparks shot out of the tip as he pointed it above his head.

'That's enough!' he said impatiently. Everyone fell very quiet as they turned to look at him 'Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff sixth years will share a room. If anyone has any objections they are free to spend the night outside in the hall.' There were no further protests so Harry went on 'Hermione will sort the girls into their dorms ... the rest of you will follow me.'

Harry stepped down off the trunk and Hermione gave him an appreciative look. 'And you wonder why McGonagall chose you as Head Boy.' She smiled and led the girls to their rooms. Everyone floated their trunks, and they dispersed without further ado. It wasn't long before Harry was up at the top most room of the boys tower once more; the room that Harry had considered home more than any other. They unpacked and talked amongst themselves, though Harry avoided direct contact with Dean, still unable to control the resentment that swelled in him. When they finally retired to bed, Harry pulled the curtains shut and laid back with his hands behind his head.

He felt drained after the events of the evening, and no matter how hard he tried to turn his thoughts to other things, Ginny's face refused to leave his mind. He tortured himself with the memory of a couple of nights ago. He had found her amusement bewildering at the time, but now he felt a complete fool. He hated to admit the things he had said to her were unguarded and honest, and it tore him that she found it so easy to move on. But a voice in the back of his mind told him it was as it should be. It urged him to let go. He rolled on his side and tried to empty his mind, but the image of Ginny and Dean would not budge.

~\*~\*~\*~

The next morning, the Gryffindor Common Room was chaotic, to say the least.

Two Slytherins were bullying a sixth year Hufflepuff girl, and when Ernie and Justin Finch Fletchley realized what was going on, they leapt gallantly at the hulks that were Crabbe and Goyle in her defence. Unfortunately they stood no chance of winning a physical battle, and if it hadn't been for Ron and Harry's appearance at the foot of the stairs, there may not have been much left of either of them to rescue. Crabbe, sporting a face full of painful, pussy boils and Goyle, sprouting Cauliflower from every orifice, scrambled through the portrait hole moments later, muttering profanities under their breaths.

And twice Harry had to intervene in squabbles that had broken out between Slytherin and Gryffindor sixth years. It seemed giving out detentions first time round wasn't enough to deter them from making easily overheard caustic complaints about one another, so Harry resorted with threatening to bunk them in together until they learned to get along. This seemed to do the trick, and they all went down to breakfast complaining about Harry instead.

'This is hopeless!' Harry said angrily to Hermione when she appeared.

'I know what you mean. I found Hannah Abbott trying to throw Pansy Parkinson out of the window a minute ago.' She rolled her eyes 'Pansy apparently commented on what a good job the Death Eaters were doing ridding the world of Mudbloods and blood-traitors.'

'Didn't Hannah's mother get killed last year?' Ron asked frowning.

'Exactly. That Pansy has got such a mouth on her!' and most unlike her, Hermione added 'If I'd just

taken that bit longer to steam my robes, it would have been over before I got there.'

At breakfast, Professor McGonagall handed out new timetables to the Gryffindor students. When she got to Harry she asked him how things were going in the Gryffindor dormitories.

'Couldn't be worse. Thanks for asking.' He answered

Her mouth had the tell tale signs of a suppressed smile as she raised an eyebrow. 'You are more than capable of dealing with it, Mr. Potter.' Harry wondered where she got her information from. 'I want to see you in the Headmasters office after breakfast. I'll give you your timetable then.'

'I was just about to suggest the same thing actually.'

'Good, then you won't be late!' She said shrewdly. She gave him the password before turning to Lavender.

Harry was just reaching for the scrambled eggs when Nearly Headless Nick drifted up through the table towards McGonagall.

'Where were you lot last night?' Ron was referring to the ghosts whom Harry, along with almost everyone else, had noted were not present at the start of term feast.

Nick turned his wobbling head 'Ah! The insatiable curiosity that is the Wonderment of Youth. We were on castle business if you must know, that of which pertained purely to the ethereal entities residing in these grand and historic walls, and does not warrant an explanation to the likes of you.' He said, looking very self-important.

'In other words, mind your own business?' Ron said glumly. Nick turned his nose up and floated to where McGonagall stood. He spoke briefly to the Professor before heading down through the floor again.

'Ah ... Mr. Potter!' Professor Slughorn appeared at his side, he appeared slightly thinner than Harry remembered. 'Looking forward to another year of outstanding potions from you.' His face was crinkled into an indulgent grin that did not meet his eyes. 'Though I feel you may not be as keen as you were last year. Your performance ... lagged somewhat towards the end.'

'I'll do my best.'

'Barely need to Harry, m' boy! As I said, it's in your blood, just like your mother. Well, must be off! I am sure I will see you soon.' he said with a wink, but Harry had the distinct impression he was not as eager to be in Harry's company as he tried to portray.

Harry spent the rest of breakfast steeling looks at Ginny, who was sitting with Luna at the other end of the table, his thoughts turned to the book that currently sat in the room of requirement. If he was going to have any chance of living up to Slughorn's expectations he was going to have to retrieve the prince's copy of Advanced Potion Making. But did he really want to use it again?

'Harry,' He was roused immediately from his thoughts by Ginny's voice. 'Have you got a minute?' He nodded and stood as casually as he could while his insides burned, and followed her out of the hall. When she reached the marble staircase she turned, looking slightly worried.

'Do you still have that book?'

He did not need to ask what she was talking about. 'Maybe. Why?'

'I think you should use it.' Her eyes had a glassy appearance, and she spoke as if the very words leaving her mouth hurt. 'It might help you ... you know ... in the future.'

Harry nodded stiffly 'Why the sudden turn around? You weren't so keen on my using it last year.' he said quietly, looking at her through narrowed eyes.

She closed her eyes for a fleeting moment before looking away from him. 'It's better to know what can be used against you Harry.' He was silent for a moment as he watched her discomfort; she couldn't even look him in the eye. Harry found it hurt to be this close to her again. He turned and headed for his meeting with McGonagall.

'Fwooper!' The large stone gargoyle slid aside and Harry mounted the stairs as they spiralled up to the office.

'Enter' McGonagall was sitting behind the desk where Harry had seen Dumbledore sit so many times before. She was placing a message into a tiny envelope. She glanced up at him as he walked slowly up to the desk. 'Sit down.'



He glanced around and saw the sorting hat perched on the bookshelf, the Gryffindor sword in its glass case, gleaming not far away. He also noticed the office was still full of Dumbledores things, though they no longer whirred busily or puffed with smoke. Instead they sat quietly, uselessly; dead. The portraits appeared to be sleeping, but Harry had too much experience with them to take that for granted. His eyes fell on Dumbledore; his chin rested on his chest peacefully as he sat in a large comfortable chair. Harry felt an acute emptiness at the sight of him.

As he slouched into the chair opposite McGonagall, it struck him that he had thought Dumbledore would always be at Hogwarts. It seemed impossible to imagine the school without him, yet here Harry sat, more alone now than ever. He could never again seek the guidance of his long time mentor and friend. As Harry's eyes dropped to the floor, McGonagall stood up and placed the message in the beak of a tawny owl that waited patiently on the stand where Fawkes once sat. The owl launched into the air and in a flurry of silent feathers, disappearing through an open window. When Harry looked up again, Professor McGonagall was watching him.

'You have something you wish to say to me.' She said gravely.  
Harry straightened himself uncomfortably under her gaze.

'There must be someone better for the position of Head Boy.' He waited for her to say something, but she only nodded as she sat down and folded her hands on the desk. Harry went on 'I'll be leaving again soon ... and I don't even know if I'll be back' McGonagall's eyes were on her hands as Harry spoke uncertainly. 'Point is I wont be able to perform as Head Boy all the time.'

'I see.' She looked at him, her expression as stern as usual 'And how do you expect to keep up with your classes under those circumstances?' Harry felt slightly annoyed that all she seemed to be worried about was his homework.  
'I'll manage ... somehow. And if I cant, I'll leave anyway ... permanently'

McGonagall nodded and stood up. She walked slowly around the desk and spoke without looking at Harry. 'This is how it will work, Potter. You will be free to come and go, though I will ask you to inform me when you leave so I can make other arrangements. And I think it is a good idea that you drop at least two of your subjects. You can pick them up again at a later stage if necessary.' She frowned as she finally lifted her head. 'You shouldn't be taking on too much if you are to do the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes for the younger students as well.'

Harry was silent for a moment, not sure if he had understood what Professor McGonagall had said. He decided he must have misheard her 'Sorry?'

'You heard me correctly, Mr. Potter. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor cannot take the position on full time, which leaves the younger students, fifth year and below to be exact, without a teacher. This is not an acceptable situation given the threat we currently live under, I am sure you agree. You have already proven your teaching abilities by the results your Dumbledores Army students received in their OWLS. And I think it would benefit the children greatly if you were to take the lessons.'

'But I just finished telling you that I wont always be here' Harry was certain he was missing something.  
'Which is why I have asked you to inform me of your leaving. You will agree that some Defence Against the Dark Arts classes is preferable to none.'

'But I wouldn't know where to start.'

'Miss Granger would be an excellent candidate to assist you in planning.' She said 'It will not take up too much of your time. The classes will be combined and you will be given the Great Hall to conduct your lessons.' Harry's head was buzzing as she added 'If they agree to it, I will organize for Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger to assist you in class. The students are all at different learning levels, so you will need the help.' She motioned Harry to stand.

Harry stood up, completely flummoxed. He had come here with the intention of giving up his Head Boy status, and instead, had somehow wound up as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher to boot.

'I'll send you a new timetable at Lunch, until then your time is free. Here is a list of all the passwords you will need as Head Boy.' McGonagall handed him a piece of parchment as she herded him towards the door 'If you could pass them on to Miss Granger when you are done. You can also inform Mr. Weasley he will be acting Head Boy whenever you are absent from the castle.'

'But, I don't-'

'This was not a popularity contest, Mr. Potter' she cut him off as he stood outside the large double doors 'you are Head Boy because you are the ideal candidate. Personally I think it would be rather selfish of you to resign.' she seemed to soften slightly as she added 'The students will need you Harry ... before the end.'

~\*~\*~\*~

As promised, McGonagall had Harry's new timetable delivered to him at Lunch. It was a given that he would be taking DADA classes, but he was pleased to see she had kept Charms and Transfiguration. He agreed with Ginny's reasoning about the prince's book, and since McGonagall had seen fit to include Potions in his schedule, he decided he would head up to the Room of Requirement later when everyone had retired to the Common Room.

Hermione was extremely enthusiastic about Harry's new appointment, and whole-heartedly agreed to help him plan and conduct the lessons. Rather annoyingly, Ron and Hermione had sided with Professor McGonagall on every point she had put forward to Harry, thereby robbing him of any chance of justification of his doubt. McGonagall had already arranged it so they would have no trouble fitting the classes in between their own subjects; seemingly she had known they would be keen to help, and so it was that they set about planning the first lesson out of three they were to conduct each week.

Hermione made rather a quick job of it. She bolted off to the library as soon as she had scoffed down lunch, and when she and Ron met up with Harry for dinner, she handed him a complete schedule for each age group for the first two weeks, including a break-up floor plan to allow for the required space needed.

'How did you do that?' asked Harry stunned.

'It wasn't that hard. All I had to do was take out some of my notes from the classes we'd done and combine it with some information from the library.'

'We kept in anything that might come in handy in the near future.' Ron added.

'This is great!' Harry felt more comfortable with the idea now that he had a plan in front of him. He gave Hermione an appreciative kiss on the cheek. 'Its brilliant'

'It was no trouble, I really quite enjoyed doing it.' She said looking very pleased with herself.

The time spent in the common room that evening was a nightmare. There was so much resentful squabbling going on around the room that everyone was on edge whether they were involved in it or not. And much to Harry's annoyance, Ginny spent a lot of time tucked away in the corner of the room with Dean.

Harry couldn't stop glancing their way and even though they both had their books open, they spent most of their time talking animatedly. When Dean met Harry's glance he shifted in his seat uncomfortably and bent his head to Ginny's ear. The anger in Harry was stewing in the atmosphere of the room as he turned his head back to the crackling fireplace to avoid Ginny's gaze.

Hermione was returning from the girl's dorm upstairs, where she had rushed off to after a shouting match had erupted, looking agitated.

'Its just as well we don't have house points this year,' she said as she sat on the floor in front of Ron 'They'd all be so deep in the negatives that there wouldn't be enough jewels in the hour glass to count them.'

'What was it this time?' Ron asked rubbing her shoulders.

'Don't ask!' she said as she rolled her eyes 'Just be thankful your sleeping in the boys dorm with the

mess they've created up there. I told them you can't throw multiple hexes like that all at once without consequences.' She looked up as two Ravenclaw girls appeared at the foot of the stairs. One had her arm around the other who was desperately trying to shield a collection of enormous red bulbs on the end of her nose. Hermione made a disapproving noise with her tongue as they crossed the room, heading for the hospital wing.

Harry stood up, 'I'm going to fetch Snape's book. I'll be back soon.'  
'Alright, I'll wait for you before we do the nightly rounds.' Hermione looked slightly uneasy as Harry headed out of the portrait hole.

He pulled his invisibility cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself as he took off for the seventh floor. Harry thought it a wise precaution to keep carrying it with him everywhere because Dumbledore had told him to do it last year, and the situation could only be worse now that he was no longer around.

The empty stone passageways were already chilled with autumn's nighttime breeze as Harry slipped through a shortcut and up some stairs, and then to the corridor where the painting of the dancing trolls resided. He looked around to make sure no one was about, chiding himself for not thinking to grab the Marauders Map before he left, then proceeded to walk up and down outside the place where the door would appear.

*I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book. I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book. I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book.*

Harry looked up at the wall. No door. What? So he tried again.

*I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year. I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year. I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year.*

He looked up and frowned. Still nothing. How can that be? He couldn't understand it. He had hidden Snape's book here and he should be able to... Then it occurred to him.

*I need to retrieve Snape's book of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year.*

After repeating it for the third time the door appeared and Harry opened it quickly, stepping into the darkness and pulling it closed behind him.

## 10. The Locket

Tall dark shadows loomed in on Harry as he pulled off the cloak. Tucking it back into his pocket, he pulled out his wand and lit it.

The vast room looked entirely different. The first time he had visited it, light had streamed through the tall windows that looked out over the grounds. Now only the waning moon's light, obscured by gathering cloud, pierced the mass of paraphernalia that filled the room.

Harry made his way slowly in the direction he had run; book in hand, desperately searching for a hiding place last year. Impatient, but sure he had turned right at some point, he passed the mountains of broken furniture, books and banned substances, waiting for a sign of recognition; something that might trigger his memory and point the way.

He felt like he had been walking too long, and his anger, which had been simmering below the surface in the Common Room, threatened to boil. The distant rumble of thunder accompanying the outside cloud adding to his growing frustration. The openings in the alley he followed meant nothing to him. He was beginning to think he must have missed what he was looking for when an enormous, ugly and fierce looking stuffed troll came into his wand's circle of light. This is it! With renewed confidence he turned right and continued on, the occasional flash of far away lightening illuminating the high arched ceiling as he searched for another familiar landmark.

Then his stomach lurched painfully. The vanishing cabinet Draco had spent most of last year restoring stood on the corner of the isle that Harry stumbled into months ago.

Harry walked slowly up to it; regarding it darkly as if it might suddenly spring open with Death Eaters spewing forth from it. But it lurked silently in the shadows now forgotten, having served its purpose. His mouth went dry as a nurtured and unrealised anger born of guilt swelled within him. How had he forgotten that he had seen it the first time he came through? He should have stopped to look at it more closely then, maybe he could have prevented... He stopped the thought angrily. He dragged his eyes away from its dark bulk as he turned into the alley and started searching for the marker he had left behind.

Using his wand light, he scanned the isle until its light fell upon a bust sitting atop a blistered cupboard. It was the ugly warlock bust wearing the scraggy old wig and tiara Harry had put there. He stopped in front of it as another searing flash of lightning flickered across the room. Reaching a hand up, he turned the cold brass handle. The door creaked loudly in the quiet darkness as it opened, and pointing the glowing wand tip inside, he bent down and pulled the book from its hiding place behind the cage.

Harry turned it over in his hands as another, louder rumble of thunder rolled overhead, rattling the contents of the room; it was just as he had left it. This was the first time he had looked upon the book since discovering the identity of the "prince". The thought that the prince had turned out to be Snape sickened him. If he had shown Dumbledore the book, if he had turned it over to him, would he still be alive? He would have recognized Snapes handwriting. Would it have been enough to prove his trust in Snape was horribly wrong?

Slamming the cupboard door shut, he headed back in the direction he had come. The anger and guilt that he had harboured for so long seethed restlessly in his body, heightened by the sight of Dumbledores doom as he passed the cabinet, unconsciously giving it a wide birth, and traced his way back along the alley, breathing heavily as his insides shook. The troll lit up briefly as another more severe flash of lightning illuminated the surroundings, and as he rounded it he spied a glint of silver out of the corner of his eye.

He stopped, just as a rumble of thunder vibrated the windows, and looked down at a large, heavy steel instrument. He paused for only a moment before picking it up and turning back into the alley he had just come from.

He strode with purpose; his mind now set on one all consuming course of action, unable and unwilling to stop himself. When he came upon his target, he stowed the book and his wand mindlessly onto the nearest surface, and in the gloom, eyeing the vanishing cabinet vengefully, Harry lifted the huge silver axe back behind him. He drew breath angrily through his teeth before he swung the bloodied blade with all the strength that his gathering hatred could muster.

The booming crash of the blow echoed in the high ceiling as the cabinet's side buckled with the force. Harry put his foot against the treacherous wood and levered the axe out. A brilliant flicker of lightning forked across the sky outside as he leaned back, pulling it behind him again. His eyes stung and his face contorted with pain as a thunderous clap shook the windows.

He brought the axe forward with incredible force, sinking it into the cabinet again. The wood folded in on itself as it shattered, sending stabbing splinters in all directions, one scoring him across the face, but Harry barely felt it. Again, he pushed his foot against the broken wood; his arm muscles straining and beads of sweat dripping down his forehead as he pulled the axe head free.

All of the anger, all of the hatred, and all of the guilt he had clung to and silently nurtured since Dumbledores death, coursed through his veins as he stepped away and brought the axe back behind him again. He threw his weight forward and let the silver blade fly crushingly into the now bent cabinet, again ... and again, with a strength he hadn't known he possessed.

The harsh sounds of shattering wood were mixed with the deafening cracks of thunder until finally the cabinet hung broken and defeated. The axe came easily free of the limp wreckage as Harry pulled it to him one last time. Hot, bitter tears were running down his face as he lifted the axe above his head, and with both hands he delivered the final devastating blow as the last clap of thunder rang out.

Finally, Harry was spent. The storm was passing, leaving behind a gloomy stillness. Panting in fury and pain he dropped to his knees still clutching the axe. His body was racked with weariness, and his mind was dark and torturous. And his heart was desolate. He hung his head low and his shoulders slumped forward as his grief overwhelmed him.

He thought of all those he had lost ... the people he had loved and who had loved him back.

Of the struggle that awaited him ... the impossible task he was left to do.

And of the fears he had for those he loved ... the thought of losing them too much to bear. His pain poured out silently in the dim quiet.

He might have knelt there for an hour or more, alone with his pain, but when he finally lifted his head in the darkness, it was with the resolve that he could wait no longer. He would find out what Kreacher knew about the locket and he would hunt down the first of the four Horcruxes. He would not stray from his path again; he would not give in to the temptation of ignorance. He had been selfish to think he could stay. More people would die the longer he hesitated.

He stood up, feeling utterly drained, and steeling one last look at the shrapnel he had vented himself on, he collected his wand and book, and headed for the Common Room.

Blaise Zabini was slouched with Pansy Parkinson under the unicorn tapestry deep in conversation when Harry appeared through the portrait hole. They both stopped immediately and stared at the sight of him. Colin Creevey was finishing a game of exploding snap with Neville at one of the study tables; they too eyed Harry with uncertain, even frightened looks as he moved passed them.

'Harry!' Hermione had been pacing by the fire, a worried expression on her face. 'What happened?' she rushed over to him in alarm and grabbed his arms to study him. 'Oh Harry,' she breathed on the verge of tears 'are you alright?'

'I'm leaving ... tonight. But I need everyone out of here so I can speak to Kreacher before I go.' She looked at him curiously for a moment, but his demeanour moved her into action unquestioningly. She nodded, frowning and turned on the others. 'Alright, bed!' she said, her voice slightly squeaky.

'What?' scoffed Blaise 'You can't tell us when to go to-' But he stopped suddenly as Hermione drew her wand out and pointed at him. 'Now!' she commanded, her voice suddenly stern.

He threw his book down angrily and Pansy scowled as they both stood and headed to their dormitories. Colin had mounted the stairs hastily the moment he had seen Hermione reach for her wand, but Neville stood staring at Harry.

'I can help Harry,' he said as he swallowed nervously 'Whatever it is, I-I want to help.' Harry had a growing respect for Neville over the past two years, but he didn't want to involve him if he didn't have to.

'Thanks Neville ... but not this time.' He said gravely. Neville nodded and walked to the stairwell. He put a foot on the first step then turned back to Harry.

'If you change your mind, I've still got my DA coin' he flashed a crooked smile and disappeared up the stairs.

'Where's Ron?' Harry just realized he wasn't in the room.

'He started rounds and told me to wait here in case you returned. I'll go and fetch him.'

'Okay' Harry lifted his head to call the house elf 'Krea-'

'Harry!' Hermione bumped his shoulder and motioned her head at the large, high-backed armchair facing the fire before she crossed the room and clambered through the portal to find Ron. Harry frowned and took a few steps to the side, and then bowed his head, reigning in the feelings that flared at the sight of Ginny.

Because Ron and Hermione were worried, she had waited for him. She had not let go to the extent he thought. When he finally looked up again, she was standing before him. She lifted her hand to Harry's face and brushed it lightly across his cheek, turning the palm towards him with questioning concern.

Harry looked down at the blood on her fingers. 'Not too subtle, am I?'

'You're leaving.' She said frowning slightly.

'Yeah' he spoke gently.

She took a deep breath and turned her eyes to the ceiling in a bid to hold back the tears that threatened. 'I'm with Neville.' She said quietly, bringing her eyes back to his. 'Dumbledore knew you could not do this completely alone. You'll need help, Harry.' Then she added 'If you need someone, call ... your friends will be there for you.'

Harry brought his eyebrows together. She spoke almost as if she knew what he was leaving to do. She continued 'Whatever you're up to, he asked you to involve Hermione and Ron didn't he?'

'Yes ... but how did you know-'

'they're your best friends Harry. The three of you are regularly off talking about things you don't want anyone else to hear.' Harry relaxed a little 'Just remember they are here, Harry. Remember they have a right to be involved even if you don't want to involve them. Its not fair to shut out the people who care about you.'

Harry watched her as her eyes swam with tears; he knew she was no longer talking about just Ron and Hermione. He reached up and put his hand to her cheek, moving in close until their bodies touched. Her frown deepened as she looked up at him.

'You're strong Ginny. You'll come through all of this and be happy in the end.' Harry wanted to believe this more than anything else. He could forgive her betrayal of him; he could forgive her turning to Dean, if only she would be happy.

Without being aware of what he was doing, his mouth came down to meet hers as she closed her eyes, spilling her tears. Their lips met sadly and tenderly, caressing softly as they played gently across one another before Harry pulled himself back, still unable to control the need he had for her. He reached around his neck and unhooked the pendant belonging to his parents, which he had worn almost continuously since coming upon it. He lifted her hand and placed it in her palm, gently closing her fingers over it.

'Keep this for me. I'll be back for it ... I promise'

Her eyes were full of doubt as she searched his face. She kissed him quickly before turning from him and heading up the stairs. As he watched her go, his whole body ached for her. He turned to the fire and stared at the dying flickers of light. He could not bear to see her unhappy. He would let her go completely when she was ready. He would spare her the pain of being with him.

'Hey' Ron and Hermione were coming towards him; both looking painfully worried. Harry nodded in acknowledgement.

'Why the sudden change mate? I thought you'd be happy here for a bit.' Ron said with concern.

'I cant sit around and wait while more people are being killed.' Harry stayed staring at the glowing embers. 'I can't pretend that I can go on like normal. None of this is going to go away until I do something about it.'

'We'll go with you, Harry. There's a be-'

'No!' He cut Hermione off abruptly in his urgency, but then added 'you're both needed here. You'll be able to keep an eye on things and at least I'll always know where you are if I need help.'

'Harry, I've told you before, we're go-'

'If I thought it was the best thing to do, I'd agree with you Ron.' He had to convince them to stay 'we still haven't worked out what one of the Horcruxes is, and we have no idea where to find the Hufflepuff cup. You two have to find the answers, or we're already lost...' Harry's voice faded as he looked back into the fireplace.

There was a long silence before Ron spoke 'What are you going to do?'

Harry looked at them 'Call Kreacher and find the real Slytherin locket.'

Ron nodded with his eyes on the floor. 'Alright'

'Check the stairwells first just in case.'

'Good idea,' At Harry's instruction, Hermione mounted the stairs that led to the female dormitories and Ron disappeared up the boy's entrance. They came back moments later with the all clear.

'Kreacher!' The house elf appeared before them with his arms flailing as if in the middle of a fight.

'What? What's this?' it croaked, looking about. The trio stared down at him in silence. Kreacher was splattered with wet, slimy looking black mud and the cloth he draped over himself, which was already shabby, appeared to have fresh tears in places.

'Have you and Dobby been fighting again?' Ron shook his head as he raised an eyebrow. But as Kreacher gave Ron a scowl, Harry grabbed his arm and swung him round to face him, summoning all his anger as he looked into the little elf's eyes.

'I'm going to ask you some questions Kreacher and I want straight answers, do you understand me?' He was stony faced as Kreacher squirmed.

'Master knows Kreacher is-' Kreacher was about to launch into his usual routine when Harry cut him off.

'Don't, Kreacher. I'm warning you. I'm not in the mood!' Harry was eyeing the elf darkly. He waited until Kreacher stopped trying to wriggle free before adding 'Just answer my questions.'

The wrinkled old elf smirked oddly as he bowed. 'Master is more worthy than Kreacher has guessed. Kreacher will hear what Master has to say.'

Harry let go of the elf's bony little arm and perched on the edge of a nearby chair. He held the gaze of Kreacher's bloodshot eyes as he asked 'Did you accompany Regulus when he visited a cave to retrieve something very secret?' Kreacher's face dropped immediately. He stared at Harry for a moment then placed his hands over his ears.

'Kreacher cannot! Kreacher is bound to keep Masters secrets.' The little elf shook his head.

'I am your master now, Kreacher' Harry said aggressively 'and you *will* answer me!' then because Kreacher did not speak though his eyes widened, he snapped 'Answer me!'

'Yes!' the elf hissed.

'Did either of you manage to retrieve the locket?' Harry was careful with his wording so Kreacher could not twist it.

The elf let out a nervous squeal before answering 'Yes!'

The elf was extremely agitated, but it appeared as before, Kreacher was forced to answer. 'Has the locket been destroyed?' Harry kept his voice cold and hard. Kreacher looked like he wanted to dissolve into the floor.

'No!' he squawked, terrified.

Harry, Hermione and Ron all looked at each other.

Harry continued 'Do you know what happened to the locket?'

'Yes!' the elf looked shocked at his own words.

Harry frowned 'W-What happened after you obtained locket?' he asked slowly, aware the answers he sought lay with the right questions.

'Master Black was unable to open it before the Death Eaters tracked him down.' Kreacher's mouth appeared to be speaking almost independently of him. He dropped to the floor and started to wriggle on his back.

'What happened to the locket after Regulus died?'

'Kreacher took it!' Wide-eyed with shock, Kreacher's hand whipped up to cover his mouth in an effort to restrain himself as he struggled on the floor.

'What did you do with it?' Harry's heartbeat quickened as he pursued him determinedly.

'Kreacher gave it to his mistress as a present.' Kreacher started to writhe around on the floor,

smearing mud all over the ornate, faded rug. Hermione watched with a mixture of horror and pity. 'What did Mrs. Black do with it?'

'She counted it amongst her finest possessions. She kept it in a glass cabinet in the drawing room.'

'Of course!'

Harry spun round to look at Hermione as she spoke 'I remember! When we were cleaning Sirius's place there was a locket, none of us could get it open. That must have been it! Oh...' her face suddenly paled 'Harry, we threw it away.' She breathed.

Harry's stomach dropped. Now that she mentioned it, he did vaguely remember something like that. But they threw everything from the cabinets away. He buried his head in his hands, not wanting to think about what they had done.

'Harry,' Ron said gravely 'Ask Kreacher if he's seen the locket since we chucked it.'

'Why?' Harry sounded defeated as he spoke 'We disposed of it Ron, it'll be long gone-'

'Just do it.'

Harry looked back at Kreacher who was positively thrashing about 'Kreacher, have you seen the locket since we threw it out?' he asked expecting a resounding No.

'Yes!' Harry looked at Ron who motioned the elf. Kreacher was getting more and more urgent in his effort to stop himself from speaking.

'How did you know?' Harry turned to Ron.

'Just a guess. He was trying to sneak stuff away all the time, remember? If it meant so much to the old bat, he would've made a bee-line for it.' Harry smiled appreciatively at Ron then turned his attention back to the elf still struggling on the floor.

'Do you know where the locket is, Kreacher?'

'Yes!'

'Where is it?' Harry hurried on

'In ... Kreacher's ... spot.' He panted.

'What, its here?' said Ron

'Stupid blood traitor-'

'Where is your spot Kreacher?' Harry said through gritted teeth.

'Kreacher's bed at his mistresses house.' the elf exhaled, his body going limp. It appeared he had told them all he knew for he stood up looking exhausted, having fought a losing battle, and scowled at them 'Kreacher will go now!' before vanishing.

Harry stuffed his backpack with everything he thought he might need and hastily wrote a note to McGonagall, leaving the Marauders Map with Ron, and then the three of them met back in the Common Room.

'Stay out of trouble.' Ron said 'I know that's asking a lot' he smiled awkwardly.

'Wherever possible,' he said quietly

'How are we going to stay in touch?'

'via these' Hermione handed Harry one of two small emerald books.

'What's this?' Harry opened it and flicked through the blank pages.

'It's a message log. Whatever you write on the front of a page will show up on the back of the same page in this book' she waved the one she held in her hand 'and vice versa'

'That's brilliant' Harry shook his head 'How did you do it?'

'I didn't. I took them from that box of test stuff Fred and George brought round over the holidays.'

Harry and Ron raised their eyebrows at her. Hermione flushed 'Well, they really do have some extraordinary magic, and I thought these would come in handy.' Harry stowed the book away and swung his cloak over him.

When he reached the large iron gates, he pointed his wand from under his cloak. McGonagall had included the gate password on the list she had given him for the Heads, with the understanding that he would need to use it on occasion. The enormous lock clunked open and the chains dropped away noisily. Harry opened the gate quickly and slipped through it, turning to lock it again.



He concentrated and found himself outside thirteen Grimmauld Place. Once he was back inside his temporary home he lit several candles and went from room to room looking for any sign of someone staying there, but there was no one about, and it looked as if Lupin hadn't been back since his last transformation just after Diagon Alley. So Harry dumped his pack on the bed and returned to the kitchen. Getting down on his hands and knees, he lit his wand and crawled into the small space that Kreacher called home.

With a sense of urgency, he rifled through the bedding, pulling out old photos and clothing that used to belong to Sirius's mother and father, then his hand hit on something small, smooth and cold. He closed his hand around it and backed out of the tiny space. Even before he opened his palm he knew this was it. It had an unnatural heaviness to it as the chain dangled through his fingers.

Harry turned it over and traced the outline of the "S" shaped serpent on the front. It seemed incredible to think he held a piece of Voldemort's soul in the palm of his hand. He finally stood and walked over to the kitchen table. Sitting down he pulled a candle close, tucked his wand back in his pocket, and rested his elbows on the table, turning the locket over in his fingers. His eyes narrowed and mouth curled in distaste. Harry knew Voldemort had killed to make it and the thought repulsed him. Though he knew it was pointless, he tried to open it, and as suspected, it proved impossible.

Suddenly the fireplace burst into roaring green flames. Expecting that Lupin was finally returning, Harry quickly tucked the locket away in his pocket. But as he watched the figure emerge from the flames Harry's heart began to pound in his chest.

All in one move he leapt to his feet, whipped his wand out and aimed it at Snape *'Petrificus Totalus!'*

~\*~\*~\*~

The spell bounced off Snape and collided with the wall; the sound of cracking stone tore through the kitchen as Snape glared at Harry.

*'Stupefy!'* Harry yelled as he backed away, trying desperately to put some distance between them. Again, the spell ricocheted off him as Snape flicked his wand, sending the iron candelabra that hung from the roof crashing down onto the table. The candle Harry had been using was thrown from the table by the force of the impact and rolled onto the chair he had been sitting on, its light flickering eerie shadows across the room. Snape snarled as he moved his wand.

*'Protego!'* Harry instantly blocked the spell as the ropes that unfurled from Snape's wand uselessly dropped to the floor. There was another flick from Snape. Harry dived into the sitting room, narrowly avoiding a beam of light.

*'I see your skills have not improved.'* Snape's voice goaded as Harry scrambled to his feet. Harry aimed at the doorway, his heartbeat racing as Snape's silhouette emerged, distorted by the flickering light.

*'Expelliarmus!'*

The curse hit Snape's shield and was deflected as he immediately sent a white light streaking towards Harry, throwing him backwards into the cold dark fireplace. His hand slammed painfully into the stone arch, sending his wand flying to the floor, disappearing as it rolled under an armchair. The ash and soot flurried around him in his panic to find his feet. His mouth and nose were choked and his eyes were being inundated as he struggled to open them. He spluttered as he pulled himself forward, temporarily unable to see, his heart pounding in his chest as something was thrust into the flesh under his chin, forcing his head up.

*'I can still read you like a book.'* Snape pressed his wand tip further under Harry's chin *'You are no better off than you were two years ago.'* Harry was trying to keep his eyes open though they stung with ash. *'Do you delude yourself that you can take on the Dark Lord like this?'* Snape leaned in close *'to him you have the powers of insect. And he will crush you under his foot just as easily.'*

Harry cringed in revulsion at Snapes nearness, the panic rising in him. Then the wand tip was gone, allowing him to lower his head. His eyes had sufficiently watered to get rid of most of the grit as he watched Snape put a few paces distance between them, eyeing Harry suspiciously and keeping his wand directed at Harry's chest.

Harry glanced down out of the corner of his eyes to where his wand had disappeared 'Don't bother going for it,' Snape said, looking down his hooked nose at him. 'Unless you want to be incarcerated again.' He raised an eyebrow 'My last visit should put you off repeating that particular little stunt.'

'What do you want?' Harry said savagely, his chest heaving with anger. This was the second time Snape had got the better of him. There would not be a third.

'I've come to give you the information I promised.' Snape's voice was silky as he pulled a small scroll from his robes and held it aloft. Harry eyed it for a moment, frowning dubiously. 'It won't bite,' Snape said sarcastically and narrowed his eyes 'not if you do as instructed.' Harry reached a hand up and took the scroll, all the while wondering why he was listening to this traitor.

'What is it?' Harry did not attempt to hide the loathing in his voice.

'It is your key to Bellatrix LeStrange.' Snape said. 'However, if you try to open it before six pm on All Hallows Eve, it will ignite.' Harry stopped fumbling with the seal on the scroll and looked back at Snape 'After six pm on Halloween, you will have a window of five minutes with which to read it, and memorize it.'

'Memorize it?' Harry eyed Snape distrustfully.

'You will find out what I mean on Halloween, not before,' Snape said unhelpfully.

Harry narrowed his eyes and scowled 'It's a trap, isn't it? If you think I'm stupid enough to-'

'I could easily force you to come with me right now.' Snape said threateningly.

'I wouldn't go without a fight!' Harry spat. Snape sneered mockingly as he shook his head. Then suddenly, his face was stony.

'You'd follow me like an eager little puppy if I wanted you to.'

Harry's chest was heaving as the anger coursed through him.

'If you want Bellatrix, you will be in the Great Hall at the Halloween feast, opening that at precisely six pm.' Snape pointed his wand at the scroll in Harry's hand.

'Why do I have to be at Hogwarts?'

'Don't ask pointless questions, Potter' he snapped angrily 'you will know only when you read the note.'

'I'm not going to endanger the school.' Harry said with his jaw clenched.

'If you do not do as I have instructed, believe me, the school *will* be under threat.' A knot formed in Harry's stomach as his mouth went dry.

'What are you talking about?'

'Just do as you're told for once in your life!' Snape growled, then he added silkily 'Do nothing until Halloween, as I've said, and remember' Snape took a step closer to Harry 'do not breathe a word of this to anyone in the meantime. Your revenge on Bellatrix depends on it.'

Harry struggled with his loathing and distrust for Snape, and the feeling of dread that had overcome him. He could not afford to ignore Snape's warning.

Snape was staring at Harry questioningly through narrowed eyes, and as Harry stood there, the image of him destroying the cabinet suddenly flashed across his mind, followed speedily by McGonagall's stern figure in the Head Office. Harry was suddenly aware of what was happening and he desperately tried to close his mind. Ginny's face appeared with tears in her eyes as Harry's heart lurched painfully. *NO!* He thought savagely, *NOT HER!*

'STOP IT!' He yelled as he tried to think of something else, anything else. Gabrielle's tear-filled, horrified eyes swam in his mind, and before Harry could stop it, a sudden flash of gold streaked through his thoughts. 'NO!' Harry felt a sharp pain in his knees as they hit the floor. He lifted himself to his feet, panting from the effort of throwing Snape out of his mind, and glaring at Snape,

he asked furiously 'What the hell are you doing?'

Snape was even paler than usual and his eyes looked almost possessed as he spoke.

'You are still hopeless at Occlumency.' He said, his voice dripping with contempt. 'You will fail Potter, because you are clueless and lazy.' Then he flicked his wand, but Harry was ready for it. He threw himself behind the chair. The curse hit the back of the fireplace, sending soot billowing into the air as Harry desperately felt for his wand. Snapes snide voice rang out 'Luck will not save you in the end.' It sounded as though Snape had retreated back to the kitchen. 'Only a *great wizard* can defeat The Dark Lord!'

Harry's fingers pulled the stick like thing towards his palm, closing over it firmly. He darted out from behind the chair and raced towards the kitchen, arriving just in time to see Snapes twirling black robe disappear up into the chimney. Harry slowly lowered his wand and breathlessly sunk into a nearby chair, surveying the damage.

It was early morning before he collapsed into bed after cleaning up the mess. There were still some telltale marks on the walls, which Harry could not mend with magic, but that was the least of his worries. Snape had made it clear something terrible was going to happen, something that might be averted by capturing Bellatrix. But it confused Harry as to why Snape was so willing to share this information.

Why was he sabotaging his master's servant's errand? Was it possible that Bellatrix was acting alone and Snape had caught wind of it? No, Harry could think of no reason why Snape wouldn't just kill her himself. So why had he come to Harry? Then a thought occurred to him. Snape wanted rid of Bellatrix because she was competition, she was as evil and as cruel as he was.

Harry had seen the Death Eaters cower before Snape on the Astronomy Tower, so he was counted as someone to be reckoned with, and Bellatrix had described herself to Harry over a year ago in the Ministry of Magic as Voldemorts "most loyal servant". It made sense; that was why Snape had tipped him off, he wanted Bellatrix out of the way.

Harry felt a certain amount of satisfaction at the thoughts that they were fighting amongst themselves, though there remained of course, the possibility that this was still an elaborate trap of some kind. But he could not take the risk and try opening the parchment now, nor could he ignore the possibility that Snape was telling the truth, not if Hogwarts was in danger.

Snapes words repeated, over and over in Harry's head as he lay in the dawn's light. He knew Occlumency was important for him, especially now. He was hiding such an incredible secret, that should it get back to Voldemort, all hope would be lost. If Voldemort knew someone had successfully destroyed the ring Horcruxe already, and that the locket was currently in Harry's possession, then he would reinforce his security around the remaining ones, making them impossible to obtain, not to mention he would hunt Harry down with a renewed urgency.

It bit deeply that Snape was right about him. Harry had none of the power Voldemort had. Luck was the only reason he had escaped him in the past. He still struggled with the most basic of things, non-verbal spells. As he rolled over trying to shut out the morning's light, he came upon a decision; after he had destroyed the locket he would return to Hogwarts and work ruthlessly to become the wizard everyone believed him to be.

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Over the next few days Harry stayed in contact with Ron and Hermione via the message log. The speech was necessarily cryptic in case someone should come across one of the books, though Harry had nothing of importance to report since finding the locket. As each day passed his notes were becoming shorter and more impatient sounding, until on the fourth morning all he wrote was one sentence to say nothing new had happened. Hermiones notes on the other hand were far more detailed.

It seemed she and Ron had started the Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons at McGonagall's

instructions, but had found they were struggling to keep order amongst so many students. In fact, Hermione had sounded rather flustered upon returning from a two-hour session on his third day at Grimmauld place, saying that they were only still doing it because McGonagall wouldn't let them quit. As for the shared Common Room, Hermione had written that things had taken a turn for the worst since he had left and Blaise Zabini in particular had become extremely antagonistic.

Harry felt a pang of sympathy for his two best friends, but he found little time to wonder at the goings on at Hogwarts. He had bent all of himself to the task of figuring out what to do next. He had tried to open the locket by force and failed miserably, even resorting to throwing it in the fire to see if it might magically spring open. But nothing prevailed, so his mood sank deeper with each passing day out of frustration and impatience.

The Order members who dropped in from time to time to check on him during their guard would not discuss why Lupin had not yet come back, though Harry began to suspect he was working undercover amongst the werewolves once more, an extraordinarily risky thing to do after he had been present at the struggle with the Death Eaters at Hogwarts; a fact Harry would bring up with him the minute he returned.

The fact that Snape had seen Ginny in his thoughts when he had invaded his mind, also weighed heavily on Harry. It was exactly the kind of thing Harry had desperately hoped to avoid and yet because of his lack of skill, and his increasing need for her, it had come to pass anyway. The more Harry thought about it the darker his thoughts became, and his growing unease and frustration meant sleeping was becoming more and more difficult.

On the fourth day Harry was sitting in the kitchen as he did everyday, staring at the locket on the table before him, feeling utterly useless, when he heard Sirius's mothers portrait start up. He hastily snatched the locket up and placed it in his pocket before hunching himself over his cold, half empty mug of tea. He heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and as they neared Harry resentfully hoped whomever it was would drink their tea quickly and leave. He didn't look up as they stopped at the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Black was still ranting in the distance as whoever it was made their way over to the table, and then Harry felt a slender hand on his shoulder.

He looked up expecting to see Tonks, but instead he looked straight into Fleur's slightly watery eyes. It was a meeting Harry had been silently dreading since the morning after her and Bills wedding. Even though Harry knew he wasn't responsible for what happened to Gabrielle, he couldn't help think that it wouldn't have happened if not for him. He had wondered if she would ever be able to bring herself to be in his company again, and part of him almost hoped that she wouldn't.

She leant down and kissed him gently on the cheek. 'Eet 'as been too long 'Arry' her voice was soft though heavy with emotion. Her smile as she looked down at him did not reach her eyes 'You 'av been avoiding me perhaps?' Harry quickly looked down at the table 'No' he forced. Mrs. Black was finally silent again as Fleur continued.

'Arry, we 'av been friends for a long time now, and I feel I can be honest weeth you.' She pulled out a chair next to Harry and swung it round to face him. He stared at the table intently and did not look up.

'Theengz were very 'ard for my family after what happened, and eet was eezy to blame you because we needed someone to blame.' Harry's swallowed the pain that leapt from his stomach 'But it did not take us long to realize our mistake, and Bill 'as been working very 'ard to find zee culprit, zee real person oo deserves our 'atred.' Harry's head swung round as he looked at Fleur 'Dis ... Bellatrix,' she almost spat the name 'she will feel zee consequences of 'er actions very soon.'

Harry frowned 'What d'ya mean?' he asked cautiously.

'You will zee,' Just then Bill appeared through the doorway and smiled crookedly at Fleur through his scarred face. 'And when 'ee catches up with 'er she will wish she never crossed a Delacour.' Her eyes glittered with revenge. Harry was frowning intently as he turned his attention to Bill.

'What's going on? Have you found Bellatrix?'

'Cant say, Order business.' He said flatly. Harry dropped his eyes searchingly to the table. He knew

the Orders hatred of Bellatrix was likely to place them all in a great deal of danger, and he was already sitting on a way of getting to her. But he had no way of convincing them of that without telling them about Snape, which would then render the plan useless. He stood up and looked Bill in the eye, determined to get an answer.

'I have to know Bill' he said slowly 'How close are you to getting to Bellatrix?' Bill sighed and closed his eyes for the briefest moment before answering him.

'I know what this means to you Harry, but I cant-'

'No you don't! You don't have a clue what this means to me.' Harry said loudly. 'I will not be pushed out of the loop on this one. Tell me how long until you move in on her?' Bill looked taken-a-back by Harry's aggressiveness, but it was Fleur who spoke first.

'I theenk ee deserves to know.' She said to Bill as she lifted her hand and touched it to Harry's arm 'Ee 'as suffered as much as anyone else 'as because of 'er.' Harry stared stony eyed, waiting for Bill to speak.

'I can't tell you Harry, you know the oath I took.' He said gravely 'Though I promise to bring it up with Lupin when he gets here tomorrow.'

Harry knew it was useless to push the point, so he slumped back in his chair and rubbed his face in his hands.

'You look terrible,' Fleur said as she took his cup away. 'You 'aven't made yourself a proper meal the whole time you've been 'ere, I expect.' She stood up and walked to the cupboards 'I'll make us some lunch.'

'I'm not hungry, I already ate'

She turned and eyed him shrewdly 'I theenk dis eez not true'

'She cooks an excellent shepherds pie' Bill chimed in hopefully.

'No, really,' Harry got up and walked to the stairs 'I'm not hungry.' then he turned and made his way up the stairs and into the drawing room, closing the door behind him.

He removed his obsession from his pocket, holding it before him. The lack of sleep and sheer frustration he had experienced over the past few days proved a volatile mix and he squeezed the hateful Horcrux in his fist, turning his knuckles white.

Why had Dumbledore entrusted this task to me? He thought angrily. What could he do against such magic? He wasn't a great wizard as Snape had so eagerly pointed out. His chest heaved as the heat in him rose. He didn't have the experience or the knowledge to deal with this. He thought savagely. If it wasn't enough that Dumbledore had made the unforgivable mistake of trusting Snape, he had also erred beyond the ridiculous entrusting the destruction of Voldemort to him.

Harry let out a heated roar, and with the strength that could only come from utter rage, he pulled his arm back and threw the locket across the room. It hit the Black Family tapestry hard and bounced off, falling to the ground as solid as ever.

Harry yanked out his wand and pointed it at the locket. How could the fate of the wizarding world be resting on his shoulders? '*Alohomora!*' Harry said through gritted teeth, feeling utterly useless. Nothing happened. How could Dumbledore have been stupid enough to believe in him? 'Open!' he said angrily as he walked up to it. He eyed the serpent engraving, repulsed by its link to Voldemort. He was going to fail. Harry knew in his heart that Snape was right. He was beyond caring who heard him as he yelled with blind fury at the golden snake '*OPEN!*'

A hissing sound came out of Harry's mouth and a rumble like thunder grew from the locket, shaking the room. It reached a deafening level as Harry backed away from it, before there was an enormous boom and the locket sprang open.

There was a blinding flash of pale pink light and an unbearable wave of heat as Harry was lifted off his feet and flung backwards. He was slammed into the wall behind him with incredible force, and then just as helplessly, he was dropped onto his stomach like a rag doll, barely conscious.

His skin was painfully blistered and burned as he struggled to get breath into his lungs. He was unable to move as his eyes looked across the floor and found the locket lying open and blackened

under the burnt shell of a chair. His ears rang and his head pounded, and he spluttered as the air returned to his lungs, finally giving in to the encroaching darkness.

## 11. A Lead and A Familiar Face

Harry slowly opened his eyes. His body was drenched in sweat and his head swam dangerously as he lifted it off the pillow groggily, trying to get his bearings. In the dull night-light, Harry could see the familiar blurry sight of the Hogwarts hospital wing. He did not wonder at what had brought him here.

During his hours of unconsciousness, the opening of the locket had played out over and over in his dreams. He was burning ... always burning. Sometimes the burning light that enveloped him had merely scolded him beyond recognition, leaving him scarred and disfigured like Mad-eye Moody. Other times Voldemort himself had appeared, springing forth from the opening locket, a green beam shooting from his wand as he hissed threateningly.

The room lurched sickeningly as Harry tried to sit up, the sheets clinging to his damp body uncomfortably. He fought the nausea that swelled in him as he reached for his glasses, placing them on his nose.

Socks was sitting at his feet; she was staring at him through her rather large green eyes, her tail flicking lightly at the end. He reached down and stroked her head automatically as he looked around the room. She immediately pressed her head to Harry's palm, purring loudly, and padding up the bed, she placed her front paws in his lap, rubbing her head against his body. He wondered how long he had been there as he scratched behind her ear affectionately and lifted her to him, glad for the company. It felt like days. He was stiff and heavy as if he'd been sleeping too long.

He wiped at his beaded forehead with the back of his arm and tried to moisten his dry, cracked lips with his tongue. A light flickered outside in the hallway and appeared to be getting closer as Socks wriggled free of Harry's grasp and jumped off the bed, slinking away into the shadows.

'You're finally awake, Mr. Potter!' Madame Pomphrey rounded the entrance, candle in hand, looking pale yet relieved. She made her way over to the bed and put her hand to Harry's head. 'Thank goodness!' Harry watched her bustle over to a nearby cabinet and pull out an assortment of elixirs and potions. She poured and measured, as Harry spoke.

'How long have I been here?' he croaked.

'Not long,' she said quietly 'considering the condition you were in.'

Harry examined his raw looking hands, not wanting to think about his face.

'Will the burns heal?'

She stopped mixing vials for a moment and turned to look at him. Harry watched her face and prepared himself.

'From what Bill Weasley said, the room you were standing in was completely burnt out.' Harry looked down at the sheets wishing Socks was still there. 'All I can say is you must have very sharp reflexes and an extraordinary shield charm.' She eyed him with appreciation as she handed him a cup of mustard coloured potion. 'Your burns are already greatly healed. The redness of the skin will fade completely within a week. Drink this, it'll get rid of that dry feeling in your mouth and help you to sleep.'

Harry waved the cup away 'I've slept enough; at least it feels like it. How long have I been here?'

Madame Pomphrey lifted her eyebrows 'A little over a week.'

'A week?' Harry repeated

'You were brought here last Friday.'

'What's today?'

'Early hours of Sunday morning.' She said as she rolled back his blankets.

'Why was I brought here and not St Mungos?'

'You were brought here under Professor McGonagall's instructions.' She stopped fussing and clamped her fingers together. 'Whatever you were doing Mr. Potter, you are very lucky to be alive,

and I highly recommend that you do not attempt to cast such a spell again.'  
'I didn't cast a spell' he said quietly.

'Rooms don't just blow up of their own accord.' She said sternly as she took the pillows off the bed.  
'You've got some explaining to do when you see the Professor.'

Harry didn't want to say anything else about what had happened, so he waited for Madame Pomphrey to finish stripping the bed around him before asking after Ron and Hermione.

'They've been in every moment they can spare I would think, and then some. None of the other students know you are here, at the Head Mistresses orders.' she pulled out a fresh pair of pyjamas and grabbed Harry under the arm, hoisting him off the bed. Harry was surprised at how difficult he found it to move, but Madame Pomphrey appeared prepared as she helped him to the bathroom.

Harry stood under the shower, letting the cool water wash over his raw skin. He had destroyed the locket Horcrux. He had seen it lying open and charred before he had passed out, but what was he going to tell everyone when they asked what had happened?

When he returned to his newly made bed, he drank the mustard potion and slipped between the crisp, clean sheets and before long the effort of having showered caught up with him. He slept free of dreams about the locket and when he did finally awaken, it was to the sounds of Ron and Hermione in the middle of an argument.

'... He's got a right to know Hermione!'  
'Yes, but its not a good idea to tell him right now ... he's got enough to deal with, Ron. Wait until he's feeling better.' Harry kept his eyes closed and listened.

'He'd want to know now.' Ron said.  
'What difference will it make, Hm? He's not going to be able to do anything about it anyway, and it'll just worry him sick.' Harry's heart missed a beat as he opened his eyes.

'What will?' he asked heavily. Ron, who had been pacing up and down at the foot of the bed stopped suddenly and looked at Harry with a guilty expression on his face. Hermione, who was sat in a chair beside the bed, glared at Ron accusingly. Harry eased himself into a sitting position and Hermione stood up and propped his pillows so he could lean back.

'What's going on?' he directed his gaze at Ron who seemed like the most likely source of information.

'It's probably nothing' Ron began uncertainly 'but the Order's lost track of Lupin.'  
'What d'ya mean, "lost track"?' Harry's stomach lurched.

Ron looked hesitantly at Hermione before answering 'He didn't turn up last Saturday, and nobody's seen or heard from him in over a week.' Harry's mouth went dry as he frowned down at the bed sheets.

'He's back with the werewolves.'

'How do you know? Nobodies said anything' Hermione asked.

'They don't have to.' Harry said darkly as he looked back at Ron 'What did Bill say?'

'Not much ... he just let it slip really ... when he and Fleur were in here yesterday looking in on you.'

Harry shook his head 'How could he go back there? If Greyback sees him ...' he couldn't finish the sentence, and he didn't need to. Ron sat down on the edge of the bed as Hermione settled into her chair.

'Lupins smart, Harry.' Hermione said, frowning 'He knows what he's doing.' They sat in silence for a moment before Ron spoke.

'So, how did you end up a crispy critter then?'

Harry told them both what happened, and watched as their faces darkened.

'We thought it was the Horcrux' Ron said 'so you managed to open it then?'

'Yeah, only by accident.'

'You destroyed it though mate. Accident or not, you did it.'

Hermione had said nothing; she sat staring at the floor with a grave expression on her face.

'What?' Harry prompted; suddenly worried that maybe he hadn't destroyed the Horcrux by opening the locket.

'It almost killed you,' her eyes swelled with tears as she looked up at him '... and there are three more of them out there you have to destroy.' Harry had thought the very same thing when he'd been showering, but the sight of Hermiones growing horror made him down play it.  
'Yeah, well I made it though, didn't I?' he tried to smile, but couldn't quite manage it.

'Only just' Ron said gravely 'I don't think you should be doing this on your own mate.'  
'Ron's right. The next time we go with you.' Hermione said as she wiped at her face.  
'No,' Harry shook his head slightly 'Definitely not.'  
'We stayed behind this time because you asked us to, and it nearly got you kill-'

'There was nothing either of you could've done' Harry cut Ron off gravely 'If you'd of been with me you'd probably be dead, and then I really wouldn't have any help.' There was an uncomfortable silence, which it meant they would argue the point no further, and Harry spent the rest of the morning hearing all about the goings on at Hogwarts.

After complaining about their disastrous attempts at keeping order in their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes with the younger students, Ron and Hermione launched into a detailed, and rather curious description of their own Defence lessons. It seemed the new teacher, who refused to be addressed as "Professor", was extraordinarily grumpy, though Ron pointed out, he did know his "stuff".

Neither of them could tell Harry what his name was as he had never bothered mentioning it, although Hermione commented that she was sure she'd met him somewhere before. When she had asked Professor McGonagall about him, she had raised her eyebrows and said he was from Hogsmeade so it was likely she had seen him on occasion and that calling him "sir" would suffice, seemingly unwilling to elaborate any further.

Madame Pomphrey ploughed Harry with various potions all that day, and he spent his last night in hospital accompanied by Socks, who had snuck in and jumped onto his bed in the small hours of the morning. He felt comforted by the feel of her soft fur on his fingertips, though his thoughts constantly strayed to her mistress. Now that he was back at Hogwarts he knew he was going to have to buckle down and learn everything he could to help him in his endeavour to face Voldemort. He would have little time to be stewing over the things he could not have, which would be a welcome distraction.

The following morning Madame Pomphrey instructed Harry to go straight to the Head Mistresses office before attending any classes. He dreaded the confrontation he knew was inevitable and as he rode the stairs to the double doors outside her office he tried to imagine the look on her face when he told her he had nothing to say. Once at the top he knocked and waited. The doors opened and Harry saw McGonagall returning her wand to the desk top in front of her.

'Come in.' she said, pointing to the chair. Harry walked forward but did not sit; instead he stood firmly and spoke with a stony expression on his face.

'Professor, I know what you want, but I can't tell you what happened at Sirius's house.' She looked at him over her spectacles 'Not unless you want me to lie.'

'There is no need to waste our time with untruths, Harry.' The use of his first name caught Harry off guard and he faltered slightly. 'I did not ask you here to explain yourself' She rose from her chair and walked around her desk, Harry noticed she appeared to be shaking slightly 'I have arranged for you to start training with the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher this afternoon, that is of course, if you are staying with us?'

She did not wait for a reply as she continued 'It also seems Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have been...'she paused and raised an eyebrow, searching for the right word 'struggling ... with the younger students. I expect you will have the situation under control when you take the classes tomorrow.' She stopped in front of the portrait of Dumbledore. Harry watched as she lifted a slightly trembling hand to her glasses and adjusted them.



'I am not ignorant of the fact that you are doing as Dumbledore wanted.' she said 'Though I will not pretend that I approve of what is going on,' Her eyes dropped to the floor, her usual stern façade seemed to be crumbling. 'I find myself in a difficult position, Harry. I am expected to give you a free reign to do as you please, yet it seems likely to be your end.' Harry could see the worry etched across her face.

'I'm sorry Professor,' he said, suddenly feeling a great deal of sympathy for McGonagall. 'I don't really have a choice in this either.'

She let out an exasperated breath and when she spoke her voice shook.

'Oh, this is ridiculous! You are not much more than a boy and yet everyone is expecting you to be able to-'

'Professor!'

Harry started as Dumbledores voice cut firmly across McGonagall's. His eyes darted up to the painting and a pain shot through him as he looked at the now wide-awake figure. Dumbledore was sitting straight and tall in his chair, his hands no longer folded in his lap, but gripping the padded arms of the chair determinedly. The surrounding paintings were also startled out of their feigned sleep. McGonagall fidgeted her hands as she half turned her head over her shoulder, though she did not meet Dumbledores eyes. She turned back to Harry.

'Be in the Defence classroom at three thirty, Potter. That will be all.' she moved back to sit behind her chair as Harry retreated uncertainly towards the door. As he took hold of the handle and turned to close it, he could see Dumbledores grave face watching him as he pulled it to.

Harry sat through his first Potions class for the year with Ron and Hermione. Although he had Snapes potions book, he had no wish to use it in class and he informed Professor Slughorn that he had misplaced his old potions book and would need to borrow a school copy until he could purchase a replacement. Slughorn handed him the copy that contained a brand new edition inside its tatty cover; the one Harry had swapped for Snapes last year.

'I say Harry, that's some case of sunburn you're sporting!' Ernie spoke pompously. Harry saw Hermione tense. He raised his eyebrows non-committedly as he sliced into a shrivelled up sea cucumber. 'Been holidaying in the south? Fell asleep in the sun?' he quipped with an amused glint in his eye. Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione visibly relaxed.

'Something like that.' Harry felt a certain satisfaction at his less than perfect potion results. Slughorn had approached his cauldron as if he were about to gleefully delve into a box of particularly delicious crystallized pineapple, only to withdraw hastily at the sight of the congealed kaki coloured gunge quivering dangerously as globulus bubbles oozed to the surface.

Afterwards the trio headed down for lunch in the Great Hall. While Ron piled his plate high with sausages and mashed potato, Harry spooned a small portion onto his plate and picked at it disinterestedly, ignoring the stares his still reddened appearance attracted. Neville sat down opposite him; his eye's flicking back and forth from his plate to Harry. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, obviously burning to ask the same thing on every ones mind.

'Its not what you're thinking Neville,' Harry said. Immediately the surrounding chatter died, though people still tried to appear busy with themselves. 'I wasn't attacked by anyone.' Harry explained truthfully. Neville nodded slightly and flashed an awkward smile. When nothing else was forth coming, the talk slowly started up again and Harry followed Hermione's glance up to the staff table.

'Have you seen Hagrid yet?' he asked, eyeing the empty chair.

'No' Hermione said 'We asked McGonagall and she said they weren't doing Care of Magical Creatures this year.'

'You don't suppose its got something to do with that Giant attack at Trowbridge, do you?' asked Ron.

'Nobody's seen GRAWP have they?' Harry frowned.

'I don't think so' Hermione looked as worried as Harry felt. Just then, Ginny strolled up to the table and sat down a few places from Ron. Harry caught her eye for the briefest of moments before she

started ladling food onto her plate whilst talking with great verve to a fellow Gryffindor sixth year.

For all intensive purposes she appeared to be in high spirits, so much so that she was attracting the attention of those around her. Harry, Ron and Hermione watched curiously as a not-so-miniature Mt Everest began to form out of mashed potato on her plate. It grew to an impressive height before the girl she was talking to finally interrupted her, nodding at the mound. Ginny looked innocently down at her plate.

'Oh' she said quietly, her expression dropping slowly. She still grasped the large serving spoon in her hand and her cheeks reddened as she stared at it for the longest time, seemingly unable to look away. Harry was on the verge of getting up to go to her when a hand fell on her shoulder. Ginny looked blankly up at Dean.

'C'mon' he said as he motioned his head to the door. Harry breathed heavily as he watched her rise, sucking in the urge to call her. Dean put an arm around her small shoulders as they walked back out of the Hall together. Harry dropped his gaze to his own plate when they had gone from view, aware of the pained look Hermione would be shooting at him.

Harry arrived outside the DADA classroom as instructed by McGonagall, glad to note the passageway was empty of gawking students. He knocked loudly and then turned the large cast iron ring-handle, pushing his shoulder against the heavy wooden door and stepping into the room.

He was just about to push it closed after him when he felt the hair on his neck prickle. Before he could react, a beam of light sped towards him, knocking him off his feet. He hit the stone wall with a thud, and then winded, he slid down it slowly onto the floor. A course grunt sounded and Harry's heartbeat raced, his wand already in hand.

'You're dead.' the gruff voice said shortly. A hand reached down and grabbed him under the elbow, helping him to his feet. 'It's a wonder you're still alive, walkin' around so blindly.'

When Harry got to his feet, the rather hairy old man, dressed in grey flannel robes and a grumpy scowl on his face, turned and walked to the front of the room. Harry knew immediately where Hermione had seen this man before. It was the barman from the Hog's Head.

'I wasn't ready...'

'Precisely my point!' he growled as he reached the desk and turned, perching himself on the edge of it. 'There's no need for me to be waistin' my time teachin' you, if you're going to walk around with your head up your ... well' the man eyed Harry as he began walking forward.

Harry's heart sank, Snapes words echoed through his mind as he swallowed 'I know ... you're right.' Harry said slowly 'Luck is the only reason I'm still alive.' Bitterness laced in his voice.

'Luck?' the man had an almost amused look on his face 'Think you're lucky do ya?'

'That's not what I meant,'

'Ah, feelin' sorry for yourself then?'

Harry was getting the distinct impression nothing he said would be right. 'No, I just...' he paused.

'What? Just want to be left alone?'

'No'

'Just wish it would all go away?' the man taunted.

'No!' Harry said, getting increasingly impatient. 'I...' Harry struggled.

'Want people to realize you're not as good as they think you are?'

'NO!' Harry said loudly 'I JUST WANT TO BE READY!' he yelled angrily before he could stop himself.

The man leaned back slightly and folded his arms; a crooked smirk was just visible underneath his wiry beard as he gave Harry an appreciative look. Harry's chest was heaving, he was intensely irritated by this mans demeanour.

'Right! Let's get started, then. First thing ...' the man unfolded his arms and stood opposite Harry. 'You need to learn to control yourself.'

Two hours later, Harry left for the Great Hall feeling utterly drained. He had been under a constant

barrage of unusual comments and criticisms from the gruff man as they had practiced-duelled, and every time he had let his anger get the better of him, he had found himself on the floor. Most of the students were already sitting down to dinner, but Ron and Hermione were nowhere in sight. He sat down next to Neville, who was gulping down chicken soup, and enquired after them.

'I don't know, Harry. One minute they were sitting in the common room, chatting to Ernie, the next they went rushing out the portrait hole.' He had a worried look on his face. 'Are you alright?'

Harry let the hot soup drip off his spoon. 'Yeah, just tired.' He got a couple of mouthfuls down before almost falling face first in the rapidly cooling broth. He gave up trying to eat and headed back up to the Gryffindor tower, climbing into bed after discovering Ron and Hermione were still nowhere in sight.

He awoke in the dark sometime later, someone shaking him urgently.

~\*~\*~\*~

'Harry! Wake up!' Ron whispered hoarsely 'Harry!'

'What?' Harry had been so weary when he retired that he was having a lot of trouble rousing himself.

'C'mon' Ron pulled at his arm.

'What?' he said groggily as he yanked his arm out of reach, not at all feeling like getting up.

'Just get your butt into gear and come downstairs,' Ron said seriously and retreated behind Harry's drawn curtains. Harry tossed the covers off and threw his feet on the floor. He sat there for a moment, ruffling his unkempt hair, trying to shake off his stupor.

'C'mon!' Ron urged from the doorway

Harry sighed impatiently and stood, slipping his feet into his sneakers and throwing on his dressing gown. The curtains were drawn around every bed except Ron's, which showed no signs of having been slept in at all. Some heavy breathing and the low rumbling of a snore sounded across the room as Harry scuffed along the floor. Treading heavily down the stairs to the Common Room, he arrived at the bottom to find Ron and Hermione sitting alone by the fire.

'You look terrible...' Hermione said with a frown as Harry dragged himself over to them.

'Thanks'

'Well go on then.' Ron said looking at Hermione and motioning his head at Harry. Hermione continued to eye Harry with a frown, but said nothing. Harry stood there with his hands shoved in his gown pockets looking from one to the other. His gaze finally settling on Hermione.

'What?' his curiosity making him feel more awake the longer it took for them to spit it out.

'I think I might know where to start looking for the cup.' She said with uncertainty. Harry immediately felt a jolt that would normally have made all traces of sleep leave him, but he was utterly worn out.

'Wha ... How?'

'We were talking to Ernie earlier this afternoon. He started asking about your burns,' Ron said.

'He was going on and on about sunburn, saying he'd never suffered from it,' Hermione spoke rapidly 'but that Zach had a really bad case of it years ago when he'd been on holiday in Italy. Apparently he did it two days into the trip, and Ernie said it was even worse than yours.' Hermione winced 'Said he spent the rest of the holiday, holed up inside his suite.'

'Prat.' Ron said.

'You remember Zacharias, don't you, from the DA?' she asked Harry.

'Yeah' Harry remembered Zacharias rather well. He had been an obnoxious character, who had managed to put almost everyone in the DA offside in their very first meeting at the Hog's Head.

'Well, apparently his and Ernie's parents are really quite friendly, have been for years ... you know, both being from old wizarding families, both being primarily Hufflepuff students, and so on.' She

said 'They go to each others dinner parties and birthdays, they even holiday together on occasion, like when they went to Italy.'

'What's this got to do with the cup?' Harry prompted, feeling not all together happy about being woken up to hear about Zacharias' and Ernie's holiday mishaps. Hermione's fingers were fidgeting with the corners of a large, tan coloured book that lay in her lap.

'Do you remember the name of the woman Tom Riddle killed, to get the cup?' she said quietly. 'Yes, Hepzibah. Hepzibah Smith, why?' The memory from the pensive was still vivid in his mind.

'Well, you remember she said she was a descendant of the original Hufflepuffs, which is why she had the cup in the first place?'

'Yes...'

'Zacharias' a Smith too.' Ron injected.

'Exactly.' Hermione said.

'But ... there must be hundreds of Smiths in the wizarding world.' Harry said doubtfully.

'There are...' Hermione said slowly.

'Great, so how does this help?' Harry said, getting a little frustrated that he was still none the wiser. Ron said interestedly 'Hermione remembered reading about the founders of Hogwarts in, Hogwarts, A-'

'Hogwarts, A History, yeah I know, she must know that book off by heart, by now. I still don't see what you're getting at.' He said impatiently. Harry then turned to Hermione. She appeared slightly hurt and wouldn't look at him, instead she watched Ron who had tensed visibly. He frowned at Harry.

'I think it would be a good idea if you just heard her out, mate.' There was silence between them as Harry and Ron stared at each other. Harry knew he had been harsh, and that his friends were trying to help him, so he breathed in his irritation.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that.' He said quietly. Hermione nodded 'I'm just tired.'

She eyed him with concern as she continued. 'Well, I thought it might be worth tracing the Smith families, there was nothing recent enough in Hogwarts, A History, so Ron and I searched for hours, and when the library closed we brought the books back here so we could keep looking and it seems that Zacharias' family is related to the Smiths that are the descendants of Hufflepuff.' Hermione lifted the book and showed Harry the cover. 'I found a reference to them with some more help from Ernie. And Harry, they are the *only* Smiths left from that line.'

Harry glanced down at the cover. *THE HUFFLEPUFFERS A look at Graduates, Volume XII* was inscribed in large grey lettering, above the badger symbol always associated with the name.

'I still don't understand. So what if he is? The cup was taken by Voldemort, the family doesn't have it anymore.'

'Harry, when Voldemort made the Horcruxes, he made them out of "trophies", things that were meaningful in some way.' Hermione explained 'Dumbledore said so himself, didn't he?'

'Yes,' Harry was feeling like they were getting nowhere and his patience was wearing thin, and his head had started to hurt. 'But I don't see how that will help us find it. He could have put it anywhere-'

'Just give her a chance, mate.' Ron cut in seriously, holding a hand out in a silencing gesture. Harry swallowed, he had no idea why, but his anger had been steadily building.

'Think about where Dumbledore found the ring, Harry.' Hermione said abruptly, obviously getting slightly irritated now too. Dumbledore said he had taken the ring from Marvolo's place.

'Riddle hid it at his grandfathers.'

'Yes.' Hermione said pointedly 'He chose to hide it there because he thought it was a fitting place. The ring was a Slytherin heirloom, so he put it in the last Slytherin house.'

Harry narrowed his eyes as he started to make the connection. 'So the cup...' he said slowly.

'Is probably hidden somewhere that has significance to Hufflepuff.' finished Ron.

'Which is where Zach comes in,' Hermione said 'its just possible his family are sitting on the site of one of Voldemorts Horcruxes. Not particularly likely, I'll admit, but possible.' She gripped the sides of the book firmly. 'He could show us the properties his family own, and he'd be able to find out from his parents if there are other places that are important to them.'

'How are we going to do it?' Harry said raising his shoulders 'He's not exactly a good friend of ours is he? And he hasn't returned to school this year either.'

'And he's a right nosy git too.' Ron added 'He'll want to know why we're poking around.' Hermione was staring at the book in her lap.

'I might be able to get him to show me. And without having to answer too many questions.'

'How?' Ron asked.

Harry thought Hermione looked decidedly uncomfortable as she spoke. 'Its just an idea, but I could use a love potion on him.'

'What? What for?' Ron screwed his face up.

'Well, if he thinks he's in love with me, he'll show me pretty much anything I ask him to, wont he?' she said. Ron's mouth started to move, but nothing came out.

'No Hermione, that's not a good idea.' Harry frowned 'You didn't see Ron last year after he ate one of those chocolate cauldrons Romilda spiked.'

'If you can think of another way of getting what we want, then I'd like to hear it.' She said, raising her eyebrows.

'We'll just ask him.'

'That's not an option, Harry' Hermione shook her head 'You know what he's like, there's no way he'll do it without asking a million questions, and even then, he'd probably refuse. No,' she shook her head 'there's no other way.'

'You're not doing it!' Ron finally spoke

'I'll make sure the potions fresh from Fred and Georges so it wont be too strong.' She went on determinedly, not looking at Ron 'and I'll do it bit by bit, so it wont be suspicious.'

Harry was deep in thought, searching for another way they could approach Zach, but try as he might, Hermione's idea seemed like the best answer. 'I'm just not keen on you doing it Hermione, what if something went wrong?'

'I'll be careful Harry, don't worry, I've no intention of getting myself in too deep.'

'What if he gets ... frisky?' Ron scowled.

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed impatiently. 'I can handle Zacharias Smith. Anyway,' she stood, still clutching the book 'it'll be dawn in a few hours and we've got Defence classes to teach this afternoon. I'm going to get some sleep, and I suggest you two do as well.' She crossed the room, turning before she headed up the stairs 'Especially you Harry. You really do look terrible.' She paused as she studied him for a minute, and then mounted the stairs stifling a yawn.

'I don't like it' Ron said flatly.

'There's a surprise' Harry said dryly.

'Really, remember what Slughorn said about obsessive love being dangerous!'

'Yeah, but if anyone can do this, its Hermione, she's very thorough.' He replied as they headed back up to their beds. 'I'm not really keen on the idea either, but I don't think we have a choice. We have to find that cup, and this is the best lead we've got ... the only lead we've got.'

The next day, when Harry wandered into the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to take the first lesson of Defence for the younger students, he had to fight the overwhelming urge to turn around and walk out again.

The Hall itself was orderly enough, with desks placed exactly how Hermione had laid out on the piece of parchment she had thrust into his hand before entering. The students however, were in supreme disarray. There were a few frightened looking first years sat at their desks, but the rest of the hall was littered with small house groups of boisterously chattering students, milling around one another, some taking great pleasure at casting noisy jibes and scowling looks at those from houses not their own.

Harry stopped just inside the doorway.

'I don't think they've seen us yet' Ron leaned in to Harry 'Wanna make a run for it?' 'Coward' Hermione said as she shot him a slightly amused glance.

As tempting as it sounded, Harry swallowed and walked determinedly to the teacher's table. As he made his way through the rabble, Ron and Hermione in tow, the student's heads began to turn. It was almost as though Harry was casting a Silencio charm in his wake. The din died out behind him as he passed, and the silence stretched across the room, until he had reached the step up to the table. When he finally turned to the students, there was complete silence.

'There's advantages to being the "Chosen One", isn't there?' Ron said, hardly moving his lips as he and Hermione pulled up along side him. This was far more nerve racking than Harry had imagined it, and as he gathered his wits, he wondered how on Earth he had let McGonagall put him in charge.

He stood tall, lifted his head and took a deep breath. 'Right' he said out of the corner of his mouth to Hermione 'off you go.'

Hermione looked at him dumb struck for a moment, before regaining her composure and flying into Head-Girl mode. Harry could hear Ron suppressing a laugh as she gave instructions in an abnormally high voice, the students continued to stare at Harry, slowly taking their seats.

'There's something to be said for awe, isn't there?' said Ron under his breath, obviously enjoying himself.

Hermione turned on him 'Oh, shut up!' then she looked at Harry 'you cant just stand here looking impressive, this is your class remember?' And she promptly sidestepped so that Harry was left standing before a sea of expectant faces. As he looked out at them, wondering how he had managed to get roped into this, it suddenly occurred to him why he was here.

McGonagall had chosen him not because he knew the subject, or because he was necessarily a good teacher. He was there because she knew the students would listen to him; she knew they would want to learn from him. The responsibility of it finally hit home. He looked down at the piece of parchment he held in his hand, finely detailing the tasks each year was to undertake, and scrunched it closed in his fingers.

'Third, fourth and fifth years will be learning the shield charm.' He announced resignedly. There was an immediate smatter of excited gasps as Harry continued, thinking of Hermiones gaze that would most likely be boring into his back. 'Split into pairs of mixed ages and houses to practice.' A low murmuring swept across the room as students turned to look at one another.

'First an Second years will start learning some of the basic hexes that can be used if you find yourself in difficulty.' This seemed to go down particularly well with the younger students who normally couldn't hope to be learning such things before their fourth year. Harry turned, preparing himself for Hermiones disapproval, but was surprised to see her smiling at him.

'I'll take the first and second years until you can get round to them.' She said and proceeded to instruct them out of their seats and herd them into a clearing at the back of the hall. 'She took that well.' Ron gave Harry a wry smile.

The session went well, though it was not without incident. There was some much expected squabbling over who didn't want to be paired with whom before they started, and also not surprisingly, quite a lot of over zealous hexing going on in both groups.

The kid that had been determined not to be in Harry's compartment on the Hogwarts Express a fortnight ago, called Hunter, seemed extremely resentful at having been forced into Harry's company once more, making no attempt to hide his agitation. Harry ignored the boy's backhanded attempts to convince others they were foolhardy to the extreme to be seemingly happy about the close proximity of Harry.

That is, until he overheard Hunter telling the freckled, curly-haired kid Harry quite liked named

Peter Taphet, that if he were a faithful Death Eater, he thought it less likely he would come across the Dark Lord than if he was standing in the same room as Harry Potter. That was all he could take. Harry calmly leaned in to Hunter and told him in a quiet voice that he would make sure he took the time to introduce the "Dark Lord" to him the next time Voldemort dropped by to attack him.

Hunter did the rest of the lesson in silence.

When the trio finally retired back to the Common Room, Harry took out Snapes potion book and flicked through it, looking for any spells he missed last year, while Ron and Hermione collapsed into a chair together, quietly arguing over Hermiones plan to drug Zacharias with Love Potion.

At dinner, Harry shoved his beef casserole around the plate, and then left five minutes after he had sat down, heading for the owlery. He hadn't seen Hedwig since he had arrived at Hogwarts, and started feeling rather guilty for neglecting her. He wanted to send for a new potions book from Flourish and Blotts anyway, and he knew Hedwig would be glad for something to do, and as he climbed the stairs, his thoughts turned to Lupin.

As much as he was clever, it seemed unlike him to disappear from all contact for so long, especially now he was head of the Order and they relied on him for leadership. Harry wished it were as easy as sending him an owl, but he knew he couldn't. There was nothing he could write in a note that wouldn't prove incredibly dangerous to Lupin if it was intercepted, so he made up his mind to go to The Burrow the following night and speak to Mr. Weasley and find out what they were doing to find him.

Hedwig ignored Harry's first attempts at coaxing her down to him, keeping her back to him, with her beak in the air. She finally relented when Harry made to leave, fluttering down to him and perching on his arm. He stroked her smooth feathers fondly, moving over to one of the gaping windows and looking down at the grounds. Hagrids hut was still in darkness, and Harry felt a familiar knot in his stomach. He had no idea where either Lupin or Hagrid were, what they were doing, if they were okay, or even alive, though he told himself they were, convincing himself he would know if they weren't.

He turned as he heard shuffling from the stairwell, a second later Ginny appeared carrying a bag of owl treats. Harry's body reacted with a jolt of pain as his heartbeat quickened. Ginny, who had been watching her feet, looked up slowly, and when her eyes met Harry's she flashed an awkward smile. Hedwig launched herself off Harry and headed straight for her, landing delicately on her arm. Pig also zoomed down from his perch and took up position on her raised hand. She shoosed them off gently.

'How are you feeling? I mean...' she waved a hand at her face, indicating she was talking about his burns.

'Its really good' Harry knew as soon as he said it, it sounded ridiculous considering how he looked. 'I mean ... its better.'

She nodded, as her eyes appeared to become excessively watery. 'I've been coming to see her,' she motioned to Hedwig who sat eyeing the owl treats 'I thought she might be lonely.' She frowned.

'Thanks' Harry said 'I don't always have the time.'

'I know,' There was a long silence as Ginny stared at the floor.

'So how's Dean?' it was out of Harry's mouth before he could stop himself. Ginny looked up at him and her eyes closed briefly. She looked back at the floor, shaking her head softly.

'I'm sorry' Harry said stupidly 'I-I shouldn't have asked, it's none of my business.' He actually felt sick as he watched a tear drop down her face.

'I can't believe you'd ask me that.' Her voice was strained.

'Ginny ... I'm sorry. It was stupid of me.'

'He told me you'd do this, he warned me ... but I didn't believe him, I didn't believe it of you.' Her voice shook and Harry thought he had never seen her this upset. He felt racked with guilt and cursed himself for not having more self-control. He could think of nothing to say in his defence, so he stood there helplessly.

She turned suddenly and was gone.

Harry left the owlery and headed back to the Common Room. The passageways were clear as he stalked through them, the anger and frustration surging uncontrollably within. He climbed through the portrait hole and headed straight to the dormitory. When he arrived, he didn't bother to put a light on; instead he sat in the dark, on his bed, and waited...

Finally, the door creaked open and Harry watched as a figure emerged, the lamp flickered on and Seamus strolled over to his bed, unaware of Harry. He dug about in his trunk, throwing clothes around with his back to him. A minute or two later Dean walked through the door.

'Have you found-' before any more words were out of his mouth, Harry had lunged at him and grabbed the front of his robes, throwing him up against the wall.

'What the hell?' Dean gasped.

'Harry!' Seamus's startled voice rang out.

'What did you say to her?' Harry roared.

'What?' Dean breathed, looking terrified.

'Ginny!' Harry pressed him against the wall with renewed force. 'What have you been telling her?' Harry could feel Seamus trying to pull his arm away.

'Harry! Cut it out!'

Harry turned his head to him 'Butt out Seamus!' Seamus backed off slightly.

'What are you talking about?' Dean asked urgently.

'Don't pretend you don't know. All I did was ask her if things were okay between you two and she fell to pieces. I want to know what the hell is going on!' Harry said furiously.

Dean dropped his head back against the wall in understanding. 'She's upset at you, not me' he said more calmly.

'Why? What have you been telling her?'

'Harry!' Ron had come charging through the door 'Harry, think about what you're doing.' He said urgently. Both Dean and Harry were panting as Harry loosened his grip and took a step back, never taking his eyes off Dean.

'What's going on?' Ron asked, looking from one to the other.

'I knew something like this was going to happen.' Dean said as he avoided looking at Harry. 'Mate, you've got it all wrong. Ginny was upset because I told her something like this would happen and she refused to believe me.'

'What are you saying?' Harry said angrily.

Dean gave an exasperated sigh 'I warned Ginny that you would think her and me were dating again. I told her you wouldn't be able to handle it. But she said you would never think that, you would never believe she could be with ...' Dean paused as he looked at Harry 'with someone else...' He trailed off quietly.

## 12. Draco's Return

Harry listened as Dean spoke.

Strangely he hadn't wanted to believe it at first. He was flooded with guilt over his stupid jealousy, so much so, he found himself desperately searching for a lie in Dean's words. But as Dean explained, it became obvious to him that he had made a horrible mistake.

Ginny had been helping Dean wade through the Ministry of Magic "Employee Guidelines" booklet, apparently his sights were set on filling Mr. Weasleys old shoes in The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department, at the Ministry of Magic after he obtained his NEWTs; a position that had yet to be filled since Mr. Weasley had been promoted. Dean had doubted his suitability because he wasn't from a wizarding background, but Ginny had convinced him to complete his last year of Hogwarts, telling him he would be perfect for the position, and proving a fountain of information on her father's old job.



Seamus and Ron hovered awkwardly for a while, listening, then they departed for the common room at Ron's suggestion, leaving Harry and Dean in an uncomfortable silence. Dean plunked himself on the edge of Neville's bed, obviously shaken by the altercation. It was a while before Harry spoke.

'I'm sorry, Dean. I had no right to attack you like that.' He said quietly. Dean had been nothing but a good friend to Harry over the past six years, even supporting him through Voldemort's return, when most had refused to believe it. The fact that he had dated Ginny had completely clouded Harry's judgment, and instead of trusting in his friend, he had chosen to believe the worst. 'I don't know why I did it.'

'I do,' Dean said gravely 'I probably would have done the same thing in your position.' Harry could tell Dean still had genuine feelings for Ginny, but this time it didn't stir up unwanted resentments. 'Ginny and I are friends, Harry ... good friends, and I want it to stay that way.' Harry watched him as he spoke. 'If you've got any doubts about the way she feels ... just look at her reaction yesterday at lunch when she saw you at the table. Even Ron couldn't have eaten that much potato!' he grinned slightly.

'She's a strong girl, Harry, but she was a mess the whole time you were lying up in that hospital ward.' Harry frowned, he thought no one but Ron and Hermione knew he was there. 'Ginny forced it out of Hermione the day you arrived.' Dean said, following his thoughts 'She knew something had happened. Ron and Hermione couldn't hide something like that from her, or the rest of us for that matter, we've been friends too long.' He held up his hand reassuringly as Harry's frown deepened 'Don't worry, only the seven of us know you were there, though what happened to put you in hospital is still a mystery.' He gave Harry a wry smile.

'Seven?' Harry asked.

'Yeah' Dean nodded 'Me, Ron and Hermione, Neville, Luna, Seamus, and of course Ginny' he counted off his fingers. 'Just the old gang.' He smiled.

'Luna too?' Harry said, feeling unusually glad for her.

'Yeah' Dean said sheepishly. 'Where would we be without her regular insights into the weird and wonderful?' Then he stood up and put his arm across Harry's shoulder, leading him to the door. 'It's none of my business, but I reckon Ginny might be wanting an apology, mate.'

Harry stopped as Dean dropped his arm and opened the door 'Thanks ... and I'm sorry.'

'Don't mention it' Dean nodded and left.

Harry knew Dean was right, he had behaved insensitively and Ginny had good reason to be mad at him. He went to his trunk and fished out the marauders map, determined to find her and try and explain his behaviour, he couldn't leave things like they were. He opened the parchment and scanned it, looking first in the Gryffindor tower and then the girl's bathroom, but her name was absent from both. Frowning, he checked the library and the Great Hall, but there was still no sign of her.

He registered slight alarm, as he searched the classrooms and the passageways, but Ginny was nowhere to be found. His heartbeat began to quicken as his eyes darted over the map checking the grounds, and then suddenly, he exhaled as a smile crept across his lips, finally spotting the small ink dot with her name above it, in Hagrid's Hut. But, just as suddenly, the smile died as his eyes fell on a second dot in the room with her.

Harry sickened as the bile rose in his throat. The map fell from his hand as he tore out of the room, his heartbeat racing as he leapt down the stairs three and four at a time, with only one thought on his mind. Tearing across the Common Room, heads turned and watched him as he charged through anyone who got in his way. He reached the portrait hole, clambering through it desperately, Ron calling after him. There was no time to explain so he forced out Ginny's name over his shoulder, the only thing on his mind as he ran blindly on, panic shutting out everything but his need to reach her.

Cutting through every shortcut he could, he flew down the marble stairs and out the double oak doors into the blackness of a moonless night. What if I'm too late? He pushed on furiously; the cold night air blustered around him, biting through his clothing as he bolted across the lawns. He ran towards the dull light coming from Hagrid's window, then leaping up the stone steps to Hagrid's door

in one bound he flung the door open. His chest was heaving and his heartbeat pounded as he surveyed the scene before him, wand raised, searching for the target.

There was a lone candle on the table, flickering in the strong draft that wafted through the open door behind Harry. Ginny sat with her damp cheeks glowing in the soft yellow light, she had turned at the sudden intrusion, staring wide-eyed in shock at Harry.

'Where is he?' Harry said urgently as he walked slowly into the room.

'What?' Ginny breathed.

'Malfoy!' Harry said his eyes darting this way and that, making his way slowly over to her, his wand pointing around the room. It was obvious by her reaction, she had thought she was alone. 'I saw him on the map. He's here!' Harry said, not daring to look at her for too long, he grabbed her arm helping her firmly to her feet. She pulled out her wand and turned her head to look around the room. It was bathed in shadow, the dark recesses impenetrable by the weak light.

'Where is he?' she said urgently. They continued hovering around the spot, back-to-back, searching every shadowy area in the room with their eyes.

'He's hiding himself with magic,' Harry realized 'stand still and don't move.' He said and he held his breath as he listened. There was silence for a moment, then a muffled sound, and the cane umbrella basket just inside the doorway tipped over.

'Harry, The door!'

It was gaping wide open, just as Harry had left it. He swore as he pulled Ginny with him, heading carefully over to it. The sound of voices began to drift across the lawns as they reached the entrance, barring it, though Harry realized in angry frustration, it was probably too late. He shoved Ginny behind him and faced back into the room.

'Ginny!' Ron said urgently as he raced towards them. Luna, Ernie and Neville, were pulling up in front of Dean and Seamus, their wands drawn.

'What ... is it?' Dean panted, his robes fluttering in the strong breeze.

'Malfoy!' Ginny said hatefully.

'Get the map! I left it up in the room!' Harry yelled over his shoulder. He saw Neville turn immediately, eventually disappearing into the darkness as he ran back to the castle. 'Keep an eye on the grounds, I think he slipped passed us.'

'Where ... is he?' Hermione panted at the bottom of the stairs, her head turning along with the others, to scan the area.

'I don't know, he must be wearing an invisibility cloak or something.' Harry said 'Ginny, get down the stairs.'

'No!' She said forcefully.

'Ginny!' Ron grabbed her arm and yanked her down the stairs, stepping up behind Harry to help him block the door. It seemed to take forever for Neville to return with the map, and Harry was impatiently aware that Malfoy was probably freely making his escape. Neville finally arrived back and handed it over Ron's shoulder to Harry, panting furiously.

'I looked ... Harry ... I couldn't ... see him.'

Harry had dropped the map without countering the spell and all of Hogwarts and its occupants still stretched out across the parchment. He searched the hut, then the area around it impatiently, but saw no sign of Draco, though Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt's dots were moving speedily in on the group milling around the hut. Harry shoved the map in his pocket.

'Don't say anything!' he said to the others.

'What?' Seamus questioned as they all looked at him.

'Just let me do the talking.' He said quickly.

'What's ... going on?' Tonks had appeared out of the dark. She stopped in front of the steps, panting from her effort.

'Er ... I thought I saw someone ... from my window.' Harry said as he pointed at the Gryffindor tower, his mind racing 'A Death Eater, going into Hagrids.'

'What's happened? ... Is everyone ... okay?' Kingsley breathed as he came into view. Tonks frowned. 'A Death Eater? ... In Hagrids?'

'Yeah'

'Alone?' she said flatly.

'Mm' Harry could tell she was dubious '... I-I don't know ... they're not here now ... I must have made a mistake.' Harry knew his friends were giving him curious looks, but none of them corrected him.

'Are you alright ... Harry?' she eyed him.

'Yeah... I-I' he said, struggling for something to say.

'He was dreaming!' Ron chipped in. They all turned at once to look at Ron questioningly, even Harry.

'Heee ... fell asleep.' He continued 'And when he woke up, he ran off, so ... weee ah ... we followed him' he waved a hand at everyone's doubtfully cringing faces. Tonks and Kingsley exchanged looks. 'He was sleep walking.' Ginny offered. 'Its supposed to be dangerous to wake someone like that, so we followed him.' She shrugged.

'I've never seen anyone sleep-run before' Luna said interestedly and received a gentle nudge from Dean for her effort.

'Is everything okay, Harry?' Kingsley asked.

'Yeah, er ... sorry.' He said painfully. Tonks was eyeing him suspiciously.

'You were sleep walking.' she said in that way the he just knew she didn't believe him.

'Er ... that's right ...'

'Does it loads up in the dorm!' Ernie chimed in 'Woke me up when he was trying to get into Riley's bed the other night!' Harry raised an eyebrow as he looked at Ernie, the flash of gratitude that flared in him because he had leapt to Harry's defence, died rapidly. 'Scared the poor fellow half to death.' Ernie seemed to be uncharacteristically enjoying playing his part in the conspiracy.

'Right. Thanks,' Harry said, shooting him an piercing glare.

'Well ... we'll have a look round before we go, just in case.' Tonks was still frowning at Harry.

'Yes, can't be too careful. I'll take this side.' Kingsley nodded and headed around the hut, Tonks taking the opposite side.

'What was all that about?' Dean whispered hoarsely as they all moved in closer to Harry.

'I climbed into Riley's bed?' Harry said accusingly to Ernie.

'Best I could come up with at short notice. Thought you could use the help.' Ernie was still smiling.

'What is going on, anyway?'

'I'll explain later.' Harry sighed 'But for now, keep it to yourselves, don't tell anyone what happened!'

'I think we'd better get back.' Hermione said quietly 'There's not much we can do if he's gone.'

'W-What was he doing here?' Neville asked turning his attention on Harry.

'I don't know,' Harry said darkly 'but whatever it was, we interrupted him.'

Ron stepped down to Hermione and put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him briefly.

'C'mon' he motioned to Harry.

'I'll be up later,' he said, his eyes dropping to Ginny, remembering why he had been looking for her in the first place. She seemed to be expecting it and she waited until the others had set off, before climbing the steps and following Harry back into the hut out of the wind.

Harry took the map out of his pocket and placed it open on the table. He doubted Draco would turn up again tonight after nearly being sprung, but he would watch anyway.

'Its cold' Ginny shivered and went over to the fireplace and pointed her wand at the wood that laid there. 'Incendio!' Orange flames erupted and almost immediately started to cast their warmth around the room. Harry watched the golden light flicker across her intent face as she stared into the fire.

'I was wrong about you and Dean' he offered hesitantly.

'Yes, you were.' She said without looking up. He breathed heavily as he slowly stepped to her, stopping at her back. He wanted to touch her, but he didn't dare.  
'I just ... don't think rationally when it comes to you,' he said 'I saw the photo of you and him at Sirius' and I couldn't help it, you looked so ... happy together.'

'He's one of my best friends, Harry.' She said, continuing to watch the flames dancing in the fireplace 'And I was happy that day, not because of him, though.' Harry's pain was growing with the intimacy of the situation.  
'And you've been spending so much of your time with him' Harry went on, feeling the need to justify his behaviour.  
'I've been helping him.'

'I know,' Harry said 'I know now, and I'm sorry.' Neither of them spoke for the longest time. They listened to the fire cracking and hissing in silence before Harry spoke gravely 'The worst part about all of this is that I should've been happy for you.' She turned and looked at him. 'I promised myself I would let go' he went on 'knowing it was for the best ... I'm just ... finding it so hard.' he breathed reluctantly.

'I thought by hanging around with Dean, everyone would think we were going out.' she flashed an awkward smile. 'Not you though, I thought you'd know what I was up to. I guess Dean was right, I assumed too much.' she paused 'I was hoping it would help take some of the pressure off you, so you didn't have to keep worrying about me.' Harry looked into her pooling green eyes.

'The night Gabrielle was killed ... when you came to me and I snapped at you to get out of the room ... I hated myself. I hated myself because that young girl had just had her life taken away from her, and all I could think was ... what if it had been you.' Her eyes were swelling with tears as she reached a hand up to his face.

'You have to stop feeling responsible for me all the time. I can take care of myself.' She brushed her thumb lightly over his cheek before letting her hand drop. 'You're making yourself sick Harry. You don't eat properly, you're looking so tired all of time' her face was full of concern 'you cant go on like this. You have to stop worrying about everyone else and think about yourself for a change.'  
Harry dropped his eyes to the floor.

'I'm alright, I've just had a lot on my mind lately.'

'Let me help you.' She quietly pleaded 'I can still be here for you without you having to worry yourself stupid, especially if I keep it up with Dean. No one has to know' He met her gaze 'you don't need to push me away. You don't need to be so unhappy. You don't *need* to be so alone.' Her voice was heavy as she added 'But you do need me, Harry.'

Finally a wet tear spilled from her eye. Harry's breathing had become strained as she spoke, the pain twisting inside his chest. It would be so easy to abandon all his cares and pull her to him, every part of his being wanted nothing more than to take her for himself, to enjoy all that she had to offer and lose himself in her. He ached to let go of the pain and find that place of comfort only she could show him.

His body trembled as he fought the urge give in, he could not forget why he had left her. If something were to happen to her, if he was responsible for her being hurt, or worse, he could never forgive himself. He had risked everything when he had lain with her in the past, and he would not do it again. He took a half step back from her, fearing his own lack of self-control.

'I can do this alone Gin. I have to do this alone.'

She looked at him almost pityingly as her tears ran freely down her cheeks.

'You need to let go too, at least for now. When its all over, maybe then if you still want to...' She cut him off as she lunged forward and embraced him. His body remained stiff with resolve, though he closed his arms about her briefly. Then he gently eased her back away from him, his expression blank. She looked up into his eyes, but Harry forced himself to keep them free of emotion, suppressing all his turmoil for one last-ditch effort at putting an end to it.

'It's really time we grew up, there are more important things we need to be dealing with.' He was surprised at the sound of his own voice, it came out almost cold. Ginny's reddened eyes dropped from him as she nodded, but didn't speak. She walked past him without looking at him and opened the door.

Harry wanted to call her name, he wanted her to give him one last reassuring look before she left, but he remained quiet as he watched her pull the door shut behind her. He walked to the table and glanced down at the map to make sure she made it safely back to the castle. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a tiny dot moving near his own. His eyes fell on it automatically.

'I think I'm going to be sick!'

Harry's heart skipped a beat. He knew that sardonic drawl well even as the name registered.

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry turned his head slowly, aware that Draco would already have his wand trained on him. Malfoy hadn't shown up on the map a moment before, and there was no way he could have come in or out, without Harry's knowledge.

'How did you do it?' Harry asked darkly.

Malfoy scoffed smugly. 'You'd be surprised at the talents of those you despise. But then, you only ever believed in Dumbledore, didn't you?' Malfoy taunted 'your ridiculous little map won't help you anymore. I won't show up unless I want to be seen.' The wind had picked up outside, and was howling through the thatches on the roof.

'Still doing your *Masters* bidding, then?' Harry said bitterly 'I don't need to ask how that's working out for you.' Draco had looked pale and drawn when Harry had seen him last; now however, he looked positively ill. 'Stumbling already!' Harry said smoothly as he shook his head gently. Malfoy's hollow eyes hardened. 'Hoping Snape will come and bail you out again, like last time?' He goaded recklessly.

'Watch your mouth!' Draco said angrily, his body shaking slightly. Harry's hand unconsciously neared his wand. Malfoy glanced down at it.

'DON'T MOVE!' Malfoy yelled wildly. He appeared to be hovering on an invisible edge. He had a crazed look in his eyes and seemed unable to keep the end of his wand from trembling. Harry relaxed his hand away from his pocket as the wind blustered outside, rattling the windowpanes.

'You make me sick!' Malfoy spat 'All that disgusting love talk between you two,' Harry swallowed hard, Malfoy had heard, and seen, everything that went on between him and Ginny. He felt his face redden. 'You think anyone's interested in your tortured love life? You think you're doing it hard because you can't be with your stupid girlfriend?' Malfoy's voice was getting higher and louder. 'You think you know what it is to suffer? Do you? You think you know what it is to feel the pain of losing ... to really lose someone y-you ... you ... ' He was bordering hysterical, and his eyes were wide and watery. He seemed to be struggling to find the words. A realization dawned on Harry as he watched him.

'He killed your family!' Harry breathed, horror struck. Draco glared at him as the wind howled around the hut outside. 'Didn't he?'

Draco's face contorted. 'My mother...' he said painfully. 'He warned me. I failed him. He was right to take her.' His voice shook 'He could have killed my father and me as well.' He looked almost possessed. 'He showed us mercy.'

Harry felt a flood of sympathy for this shell of the boy he had loathed for so long, but it wasn't enough to hide his frustration at Malfoy's continued loyalty to the monster that had killed his mother.

'Mercy?' Harry scowled 'He doesn't care about you, your mother, or your father. The only reason

your dad is still alive is because he's in prison!' Outside, the rain pitted itself against the windows.

'I have been given a chance to make things right!' Malfoy said with nervous agitation. 'And this time, I will not fail!'

'You have a chance to make things right only if you turn from Voldemort, before you do anymore harm!' Harry said angrily.

Malfoy looked at Harry for a moment, his expression unreadable, and then all of a sudden he burst out laughing, barely able to keep his wand trained on Harry. It was a strange, mad sounding laugh that slowly died off as he spoke.

'You are too much, really! You always want to be the hero, don't you?' he mocked 'Think you can turn me? Think you can make me "come over to the good side?"' Harry watched as his expression grew serious and he renewed his aim, he was finding Dracos instability discomfoting, and more than a little dangerous, 'No, my path is set, Potter. Has been all my life, just like you, really.'

'What are you doing at Hogwarts?' Harry asked, abandoning his attempt at getting through to him. 'Like I'd tell you!' he said spitefully, though after a moment, his face dropped and he appeared to be trying to read Harry's expression. 'I'm not here to harm anybody.' For the first time there was no trace of sarcasm or anger. 'Just stay out of my way.'

'Right,' Harry scoffed bitterly 'because I can trust you, cant I? I can take you at your word.'

Draco eyed Harry over his wand tip 'It was you who destroyed the Vanishing Cabinet, wasn't it?' Harry tilted his head in a nod.

'How annoyingly inconvenient of you.' Draco sneered. 'I had thought I could use it again'.

'Then I'm even gladder I did it.' Harry said. The front door was rattling along with the window pains, from the force of the wind swirling outside the hut.

'It doesn't matter; I have a better way of getting in and out now. Sorry to deny you a good gloat.' Draco was sounding like his usual self again.

'I wont let you hurt anyone, Draco.'

This appeared to upset Malfoy greatly 'I've already told you, I'm not here to hurt anyone, I'm loo-' he stopped abruptly, his breathing ragged with fury.

'Looking?' Harry said sharply. 'For what?'

'Enough!' he snapped 'I'm through talking. Turn around!'

'Not a chance' Harry said darkly, his hand drifting nearer to his wand.

'Just do it!' Malfoy said impatiently.

'I'm not turning my back to you.' They glared at each other for a long moment. Harry was watching Draco closely for any sign of movement. The wind continued to howl and the rain had turned to hail as it bit against the windows and doors. Suddenly there was a loud bang behind him and Harry's head spun to see what was happening.

The door was swinging inwards on its hinges, revealing the inky blackness beyond. The wind had forced it free of the latch, and hail was streaming into the hut, extinguishing the candle and making the map fly off the table. He quickly lunged for it, as it rushed towards the flickering, dancing flames in the fireplace, grabbing it just in time. When he looked round to find Draco, the room was empty. Harry hastily pulled the map apart and checked it, but could see neither Draco Malfoy, nor anyone else around the area of the hut.

Shoving the map into his pocket, he went through the door, and pulled it firmly shut after him. Placing his arms up in front of his head to shield the worst of the hail, he dragged himself across the dark grounds and headed through the large oak doors.

'Potter! What are you doing?' Filches gruff voice sounded as he made his way across the entrance. 'Where 'ave you been, eh?' He was looking at Harry through narrowed eyes.

'Doing my nightly rounds.' Harry had stopped at the foot of the stairs. 'Maybe you've forgotten, but I'm Head Boy, which means it's my duty to be out and about at this time of night.'

Filch looked thoroughly unimpressed. 'You're not supposed to leave the inside of the castle. McGonagall's gonna hear about this!'

'Whatever,' Harry said resignedly and turned to mount the stairs.

'You're not above the rules, Potter!' Harry could hear Filch yelling after him. 'Your going down this year!'

Harry ignored the remarks, suddenly too tired to be angry. Once in the Common Room, he weaved his way over to Ron and Neville.

'Hey, What kept you?' Ron asked 'You're wet!'

'Hermione gone to bed?' Harry asked.

'Nah, she went to sort out some problem in the girls bathroom. It's a bit strange, isn't it?' he added, changing the subject 'I didn't expected Malfoy to show up here again.'

'Maybe he's here to target someone else,' Neville said 'maybe he's here for you this time, Harry.' he was looking rather worried.

Harry grunted 'I don't think so, he is up to something though.' Just then, Hermione appeared, looking very bedraggled. She was soaked, head to foot, and her shoes were squelching as she walked.

'Did you go back outside?' Ron said incredulously.

'No,' Hermione said, obviously irritated. 'I had a run-in with Moaning Myrtle.' She frowned at Harry

'She hasn't been at it in the boys bathroom as well, has she?'

'No.' Harry motioned his head for them to lean in, and he explained what happened with Draco.

Neville had seemed particularly disturbed by the news of Draco's mother, Narcissa.

'I bet it was LeStrange,' he said as he stared into the fire.

'I don't know, maybe. Though I got the impression that it was Voldemort himself.' Harry said, then turning to Hermione, who was enveloped in an enormous amount of steam as she tried to dry her robes with her wand, he asked 'Do you know how he was able to be in Hagrid's without showing up on the map?'

'Honestly? No. The map shows a person, even if they're invisible, and if they are an animagus, though I seriously doubt he has the talent for that anyway, and he couldn't have apparated.' She said. Harry could tell she was mulling it over in her head.

'Whatever he's doing, I don't like it.' Ron said darkly 'the idea of him wandering around the castle whenever he feels like it...' he looked at Harry.

'I don't either.' Harry said, then added 'Though I believe him when he says he's not here to harm anyone,' Neville and Ron looked at him dubiously 'not directly anyway.'

'Lets face it Harry,' Hermione frowned 'If he's here for Voldemort, its hardly going to do any of us any good, is it?'

Harry sat in the armchair next to Rons and drummed his fingers on the armrests.

'We've got to figure out what Voldemort has set him to do.' Hermione matter-of-factly. 'The fact that Voldemort has placed him, of all people here, I just don't get it, its like before, with Dumbledore, seems to me Voldemort wants him to fail'

'Could be another angle.' Harry whispered 'Draco's fool enough to believe he is important to Voldemort still, he's eager to please his *Master* to keep what's left of his family alive, and Voldemort knows now he doesn't have it in him to kill. Voldemort may have sent him back here on a task specifically suited to him alone. Cant imagine what though.' Harry sighed.

'I think we should ready as many of the old DA as we can!' Neville spoke with surprising strength of conviction. 'Hermione, can you make up more of those coins, for the members who left them behind, or lost them.'

'I suppose so,' she said with a vague shrug.

'How many, and how long?' Harry picked up on the idea. Hermione saw Harry's determination and thought about it for a moment.

'I'll have to find out who's left, and who still wants to be involved. After that, maybe a week to get the coins organized, charmed and distributed.'

'All right, it's a start' Harry said, then he paused for a moment, frowning and asked Hermione 'Can you make us a batch of Felix's Luck potion?'

'I don't know. It takes such an incredibly long time, I mean, even if we start now, it won't be ready until March.' She said.

'I'll lend you Snape's book, follow his instructions and it'll come out better than ever.' Harry was determined to get it underway, even though it wouldn't help them on Halloween.

'Some of the ingredients could prove hard to get.'

'We'll 'borrow' them from Slughorn's storeroom.'

'Alright' she sighed 'I'll look into it tomorrow.'

'Good' Harry said as he walked to the foot of the stairs 'I'm going to bed, I've got another session with Sir tomorrow.'

'Oh, and Harry, watch out up there!' Hermione added 'Apparently Myrtle overheard Crabbe and Goyle planning some sort of revenge on you, for hexing them after they attacked Ernie and Justin.' Harry sighed 'Tonight?'

'No idea, just be careful!' she said in her Mrs. Weasley way.

### **13. Harry's Training and Lupin's Wolf**

Nothing came of Crabbe and Goyle's threat, in fact, Harry rarely saw them over the next few weeks, and as the days passed, he studied every spare moment he had, practicing non-verbal casting with Ron and Hermione and learning advanced spells, some of which, he found in books Hermione had pulled from the library, others his new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher taught him.

They were finally privy to the gruff old man's name when they overheard McGonagall call him Abe in the passageway one day, though of course, the students continued to refer to him as Sir as he was not at all the type of teacher to be on a first name basis with.

He was particularly tough on Harry during his two-hour lessons, which Harry shared with him twice a week. Considering how old he appeared, he had a lot of stamina, even though he wasn't particularly nimble on his feet. He was however, very adept at firing curses and hexes Harry's way the minute he relaxed, or lost concentration, leaving him bruised and exhausted at the end of each session. But he was learning to live on his nerves, gaining confidence in his reaction time and his ability.

Ron had visited Mr. Weasley, instead of Harry because he was keen to check on his mother, who must have been spending a lot of time alone now that school was in full swing. He stayed overnight, and when he returned, he said Lupin still hadn't checked in, but Hagrid was accounted for, though Mr. Weasley wouldn't enlighten Ron any further as to his whereabouts, he had however, promised to let them know the minute Lupin re-surfaced.

Hermione had pointed out, that with Lupin unable to make contact, it might be difficult, if not impossible for Bill to continue his hunt for Bellatrix. Harry was secretly rather relieved at the thought, though he hoped daily for news of Lupin's return.

Before Harry bathed, he took to standing before the mirror in the Prefects bathroom, trying his hand at full body transfiguration. It seemed impossible for him to complete the transformation, many times finding himself staring back at some grotesquely half formed part of his body, wondering if he was going to have to walk the halls to Madame Pomphrey's domain for all to see, to return him to normal. But he persevered; often working himself so hard he would be dripping with sweat from the sheer effort of it. At meal times, on the occasions when he didn't skip it altogether, he never lingered at the table, downing something to quell the ache in his stomach, then resuming his studies.

When he slept, his dreams were full of dark and frustrating images; snakes and menacing shadows, and the people he loved, who looked completely normal one minute, laughing and chatting, suddenly dropping to the ground lifeless, the next. One dream he had when he was still back at The Burrow had begun re-occurring. It was always the same;



Sirius, his knuckles white and his body stretched out behind him, struggling to keep from being sucked into the endless black mouth of a doorway, and Dumbledore staring wordlessly at Harry, one arm held aloft from his flowing robes, as if in offering. Harry had the feeling if he could just reach him, if he could get to whatever it was Dumbledore held in his hand, he would be able to save Sirius.

But always, Harry's struggling got him nowhere, fighting uselessly and desperately against an unseen force. Then Snape would appear, standing before them, both arms above his head, grasping a shining object. He would thrust it down just as Sirius called Harry's name in warning, and at exactly that point every time, Harry would wake, his sheets locked around him and drenched in sweat.

Day after day, he continued to push himself relentlessly. His ruthless workload took a heavy toll on him, and his clothing began to hang loosely off his lithe body. Hermione fussed over him, but Harry had little time to indulge her, and snapped at her motherly attempts to slow him down. Whenever he saw Ginny, or felt her near, a resentful anguish would rise in him, reminding him of what Draco had said, and of how unimportant his need for her was.

Harry's Defence classes for the younger students were improving gradually; the biggest problem still lay in them learning to work with each other. Harry had thought McGonagall had very good reasons for trying to unite them this year, and as much as it was proving a difficult task going against the school's thousand year old tradition, it was not impossible. In the end Harry took a leaf out of Slughorn's book and introduced an incentive.

He decided to award seven students, seven vials of Hermione's Good Luck potion at the end of the year. This tact seemed to work almost instantly. The students took up their learning with a new nerve and ended their out and out squabbling, though they still appeared unable to help themselves unleashing the odd humiliating curse on unsuspecting students in opposing houses. The Gryffindor Common Room's atmosphere however, was stifling at times, scuffles still erupting when things reached boiling point.

Early in the evening, on the night before Halloween, Harry was climbing through the portrait hole, Ron and Hermione in tow, when he suddenly felt the skin on his neck prickle. He hit the floor just in time to avoid a stray curse, and as he picked himself up, he discovered there was an all out brawl and hex-a-thon raging before him. He was already tired and feeling more than little strung-out after another session with Sir, so when Harry walked in on the mayhem, his patience with their situation evaporated.

He walked passed the scuffling students unnoticed, and up to the boy's dormitories, where he opened every second door off the stairwell, flicked his wand, and tossed all the inhabitants' belongings onto the landings. He came across the occasional straggling student, obviously hiding from the turmoil downstairs, and when they saw Harry tossing all their belongings magically out of the door, they tried to put as much distance between themselves and Harry as they could, regarding him dangerously. When he reached the room below his, he turned and clambered back down over the debris, locking the newly emptied rooms with a charm Hermione had come across in one of the books in the Restricted Section of the library. When he began climbing the girls to do the same, forgetting about the fact that the stairs would convert into a slippery-dip in his anger, a quiet voice interrupted him.

'I'll do it, Harry' Hermione had stopped him with her hand on his shoulder and a worried look on her face. He waited as she climbed the stairs and repeated his actions on the girl's belongings, barring anyone trying to enter the stairwells to see what was happening. By the time she returned, word was spreading that people had been thrown out of their rooms. There was a lot of whispering and scowling, all fighting forgotten, as many of them eyed Harry nastily in anticipation. He finally climbed a couple of steps and turned gravely.

'You were warned if you didn't grow up and learn to get along, then you would be thrown together, until you do.' His chest was heaving angrily 'those who's belongings now lie on the stairwell, can move into another room, I don't care which. And as this is your doing that has caused this upheaval, you will not be calling on the house elves, if there aren't enough beds, tough!' He said threateningly 'I've locked the doors, and they will stay locked until you change your attitudes!'

Hermione and Ron were watching Harry intently as a murmuring swept through the faces, growing steadily from quietly angry protests to louder, more prominent, outrage.

'Who do you think you are?'

'YEAH!'

'It was bad enough the way things were!'

'WELL, OBVIOUSLY IT WASN'T! BECAUSE YOU STILL DON'T GET IT!' Harry yelled furiously. All went quiet as sparks shot out from the end of his wand as it hung by his leg.

'This school is under threat. At anytime, Death Eaters, or worse could come marching in here and start killing, just because that's what they do!' You could have heard a pin drop as Harry opened them up to his fears, fed up at their ignorance.

'You're not safe here; you're deluding yourself if you think you are.' He glanced at Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle, who were scowling angrily at him 'No matter what house you are from.' Harry was gradually calming as he went on. 'Neither are you in any more danger than if you were at home. But your stupid, petty squabbling could actually get you killed. If we were attacked right now, almost all of us would fall.'

Harry raised his wand, pointing to the ceiling 'and the younger students in the Ravenclaw tower ... what hope do you give them if they had to stand alone? They are family too, in some cases, your brothers, your sisters ... ' Harry's words appeared to be sinking in. 'you cannot pretend none of this is happening, nor can you hide in ignorance. Voldemort is closer than you think. No one is safe.'

Again Harry eyed Zabini and his fellow Slytherins 'Voldemort kills his own as easily and as cruelly as he kills innocents. And if he took Hogwarts, then our school, our families, our entire future, will be lost.' He glared at them, waiting for some sort of backlash, but he was met with grave silence.

'We don't stand a chance if we can't unite.' The room was completely still. Harry looked at their stunned faces, then he dropped down from the step and crossed to the portrait hole, the students parting as if worried they might bring undue attention to themselves. He climbed through it and was gone, leaving silence in his wake.

He was still bitterly imagining the uproar in the common room that would have ensued after he left, when he pushed the front door of Number twelve Gimmauld Place closed behind him. Someone must be staying, he thought, as he registered the dull glow of a lamplight, drifting up the stairs from the kitchen. He tucked his invisibility cloak away and descended the stairs noiselessly, another trick he was learning from his Defence teacher, who had taken to teaching him tactics for what he called 'keeping yourself alive before, during, and after battle', eventually emerging at the foot of the stairs.

'Lupin?'

A figure was hunched over the thickly wooden table. The head turned slowly, menacingly, to look at him. Harry grabbed the doorframe to steady himself at the shock of finding himself standing under the gaze of a semi-transformed werewolf. Lupin's upper body was heaving slowly and heavily, and his hands were stretched out before him on the table, his long claw-like fingernails imbedded in the wood. His robes were torn and matted with dark stains, and his bloodshot eyes glittered dangerously at Harry.

Harry was frozen to the spot. He had not thought to note the moon was only just passed full, and he certainly hadn't expected to find Lupin here suddenly, when they had no news for weeks. But he was here, and he was still partly transformed, and he was eyeing Harry in a most discomforting way.

'Lupin...'

Lupin didn't move, whether due to the pain of the transforming, or the slight, but very unlikely possibility he recognized Harry. Wincing, Harry realized the dark patches on his robes were blood. The stench of it had hit his nose. Harry took a half step backwards as he saw Lupin's face, it was distorted and animalistic, his mouth was bloodied and alien to Harry. He had no idea how to react,

so after standing there for a while, he moved slowly and cautiously, one foot at a time, into the kitchen, keeping his eyes locked on Lupin.

Lupin did not move, just watched Harry warily with heavy eyelids. After a few uncomfortable minutes, Harry decided to make some tea in the hopes that the normalness of the action would settle his nerves, but as he reached for the cups, he stupidly knocked one crashing to the floor with a shaky arm.

A vicious howl echoed through the empty stone kitchen.

Harry froze.

That was thick! He chided. When it appeared Lupin had calmed slightly, Harry resumed his slow movements of making a pot of tea, being meticulously careful to not make any clattering noise, which might set him off again.

Finally Harry placed the teapot and cups on the table, and then hesitantly sat down opposite Lupin, alert to him, but not looking him directly in the eye. They must have sat there for close on an hour, Lupin slowly losing his wolf features, his breathing becoming more natural, Harry could even hear the sound of his bones crunching and reforming every now and then, as Lupin's face contorted with the pain, the occasional gasp escaping his lips.

It was a slow and horrible process and it pained Harry to watch his friend have to endure it. A new appreciation of loathing and disgust for the beast that did this to Lupin, Fenrir Greyback, grew inside of him. At one point near the end, Lupin had looked in so much agony his eyes rolled back in his head and he let out a long strangled moan. Harry automatically reached out for his hand, whose claws had finally retreated to fingernails, and clasped it firmly. Lupin gripped his fingers, squeezing them painfully for a moment, and then releasing them.

It was over.

'I made some tea.' Harry pushed an empty mug across the table and heated the pot with his wand, then poured them both a drink.

'Is it always like that?' he asked gravely.

'If I'm lucky, and I have someone to sit with me.' Lupin looked up at Harry from under his eyebrows. 'That was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, Harry. If you'd have come in only moments before, I might have ripped you to shreds, or worse.' Harry knew he meant he might have bitten him and turned him into a werewolf. 'It's worse when I'm out with-' Lupin stopped abruptly.

'I know you're back with them.' Harry said darkly.

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Lupin and Harry sipped at their tea. Lupin did not seem to want to elaborate on his time with the werewolves, so Harry drew his attention to the dark stains on his robes.

'What's all the blood?' He asked hesitantly.

'Blood?' Lupin said blankly. He followed Harry's gaze to his chest and pulled at his robes, trying to see what Harry was talking about. Harry watched as Lupin's breathing quickened. A look of repulsion spread across his face at the still sticky smears of blood. Turning his eyes on the table in agitation, he muttered 'I don't understand', and then looked up at Harry, frowning. 'I can't remember ... I thought I got back in time.' Lupin had a pained expression on his face. 'I-I remember ... I-I think...'

Harry swallowed his hot tea hard. 'You wouldn't have hurt anyone. Not you!' Fear swept across Lupin's face as he stared down at the blood on his chest. Harry struggled to help him remember. 'Think! What's the last thing you remember?' he said, trying to hide the fear in his own voice.

'I-I ... I was ...' Lupin stumbled. Harry could tell he was in shock, already thinking the worst. 'I-I was

trying to get back here ... before I transformed. I was ill, didn't think I'd make it ... had trouble seeing the path at my feet by the time I got here ... yes!' Suddenly he looked back at Harry 'I got back here in time, I remember. I remember standing outside and saying number twelve Gimmauld Place! I came inside ... down here ... and lit a fire in the sitting room...'

His face dropped as he glanced over his shoulder to the doorway behind him. Harry looked beyond into the semi dark room from where he sat, a strange sense foreboding came over him so he stood and walked slowly to the sitting room, he leaned his head in and scanned the area. The room was in darkness, but for a faint orange glow from the dying embers in the fire, illuminating odd shapes nearby. Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the hanging candelabra. As the room flickered into light, the shadows receded, and the shapes became distinguishable.

Harry gasped, as he stared at the horror before him.

'What?' He could hear Lupin's chair scrape along the floor behind him, as he pushed it away from the table. He came up behind Harry and stopped for only a split second, before pushing past him and moving swiftly to the centre of the room where he knelt beside the broken body that was strewn face down across the bloodied rug on the floor.

Harry realized this had been why the smell of blood had been so strong. The armchairs were both overturned, one had been ripped and torn to shreds with sharp teeth and claws, the other looked as if it had been sprayed with blood, smeared in an ensuing struggle. The coffee table was snapped and collapsed in the centre, and the lounge had been thrown against the wall, a large crack in wall above it covered it with brick dust.

Everything in the room had been violated, candles were broken and laying on the floor, cushions with white cotton filling bursting from ragged tears littered the area, and blood streaked across the wooden floor where it appeared the body had been dragged. Lupin was hunched over the figure with his hand on its shoulder, pulling the torn clothing back from the bite marks. As Harry walked silently over to them, he could hear Lupin's heavy breathing and knew what he was thinking.

He had killed an Order member who had either been here already when Lupin arrived, or had walked in on Lupin during his change. Harry crouched down on the opposite side of the body, eyeing Lupin with a mixture of pity and fear. Lupin had his eyes closed, seemingly unable to bring himself to turn the body over and see who it was. Neither of them spoke, as Harry exhaled and put both his hands under the side of the body, heaving it up slowly, and letting it roll onto its back.

He looked hesitantly up at the face. It must have been an Order member he hadn't met, for there was nothing familiar about the bloodied face. He looked at Lupin, unsure of what his reaction would be, and was surprised to see him staring at the face with fury. All of a sudden Lupin growled and tossed the body face down again.

'What?' Harry said, immediately sensing something wasn't right. Lupin breathed heavily in relief, looking at Harry.

'This was one of Fenrir's spies! A Death Eater called Rosenberg! A thoroughly nasty piece of work. He was used when it was necessary to have someone that wasn't inflicted with the turning at every full moon.' He shook his head 'He must have followed me back here, it seems Fenrir is still wary of me.' Lupin stood up and Harry followed, getting to his feet.

'But how did he get in here?' Harry frowned.

'I stupidly said the location aloud when I came here to enter, the password to the door I suspect too. I was almost out of my mind by that time. As secretkeeper Harry, I'm not restricted the same way you are.' He was shaking his head again 'I left it too late to seek solitude before I turned, and in doing so I risked Voldemort finding out where the Head Quarters is. If Rosenberg had reported back to Fenrir, everything would have been exposed ... eventually.'

Lupin ran a shaky hand through his hair. 'A stupid risk that could have destroyed all the progress we've made so far, not to mention the lives of everyone who comes in and out of here.' He looked pityingly down at the body again. 'I imagine he tried to hide himself, but the smell of human flesh is rather easily picked up when you're a werewolf in such close quarters.'

'Considering he's rejoiced in watching Fenrir hunt first hand, even set people up for him in the past, he should have known better. Unfortunately, he will be missed when he doesn't check back, which means I'm going to have some explaining to do.' Harry's sympathy for Rosenberg was rapidly disappearing. 'I'm going to get cleaned up,' Harry could tell he was disturbed by what he had done. Lupin left the room and returned a short time later, washed and in fresh robes.

Harry helped him clean up the mess, though they still had to decide what to do with the body.

'I think we'll put it in one of the rooms, I'll send for Bill and Sturgis. I need to find out what they've been up to while I was gone anyway.' Lupin said, and released a silvery patronus out of the high, tiny slit-like kitchen window. He levitated the body and floated it up the stairs.

Harry had removed the last of the blood from the floor when Lupin reappeared and stopped at the foot of the stairs, watching Harry as he picked the cups off the table and placed them in the sink.

'I think we need to have a little chat, Harry.' He said sternly. Harry looked at him blankly, and then suddenly understood the change in Lupin. He had seen the burnt out drawing room when he was looking for a place to put Rosenberg. 'Leave that, and come and sit down.' He commanded as he walked back to the table. He stood with one hand on the back of a chair, eyeing Harry's guilty expression knowingly. Harry sat down with a sigh. He knew this moment was coming; he had been dreading it ever since Dumbledore had died.

'I think we've both skirted the issue of what you and Dumbledore were up to, long enough.' He leaned both hands on the back of the chair and glared down at Harry. 'What ever it is you are doing, it is proving far more dangerous than I am sure even Dumbledore could have bargained for.'

'No it isn't.' Harry said flatly 'It is exactly what he expected.'

'I find that very hard to believe, Harry.' He sounded angry now. 'I have played along with this ... this thing between you two, its gone against my better judgment, but I've given you the room you've asked for. I haven't pressured you because McGonagall told me that you made it quite clear you had no intentions of telling anyone what's going on. She said Dumbledore had instructed you to say nothing. All of this may well be true. But look at you Harry, you look tired and drawn, and bordering on mal-nourished!' His voice was gradually building into a quiet shout.

'It's clear to me, whatever it is you are doing, it is not only extraordinarily dangerous, but it's taking too heavier a toll on you physically and mentally. You cannot expect me to stand by and watch you do this to yourself.' He was frowning as he added 'I assume you are responsible for what is left of the drawing room?'

'Yes.' Harry answered, feeling his own temper rise.

'Am I also correct in assuming you were in the room at the time it was destroyed?'

'You are.'

They were glaring at each other, the atmosphere between them electric. Harry could feel himself readying to do battle. It infuriated him that Lupin seemed to be insinuating he was behaving irresponsibly. He had no idea how Harry had struggled with the weight of the task Dumbledore had left him! It wasn't like he didn't know he was in over his head!

Lupin's eyes scanned Harry's face. He appeared to realize the reaction he was provoking, and closed his eyes before taking a deep breath, and exhaling it wearily.

'Enough, is enough, Harry.' his anger slowly dissipating. He pulled the chair out and sat down with his elbows on the table. 'Help me to understand what's going on.'

Harry's anger also ebbed, aware Lupin was acting out of concern. He lifted his hand to his face and rubbed at his forehead, wondering how to answer. He could feel Lupin's eyes boring into him. He would not lie to him, his relationship with Lupin had grown well beyond such action, and he was only too aware Lupin would not be fobbed off with a weak excuse this time. So he decided on the truth.

'Dumbledore discovered something about Voldemort, something that no one else knows; not even his Death Eaters.' He said. Lupin shifted in his chair expectantly. Harry thought carefully about what to say next.

'If he finds out that Dumbledore knew, if he realizes what I'm doing, then I won't be able to finish what Dumbledore started.' He watched Lupin for his reaction.

'Why is it so important?' Lupin frowned through narrowed eyes. It was Harry's turn to shift in his seat uncomfortably.

'Because ... it's the difference between me killing him,' his eyes dropped to the table, not wanting to see Lupin's reaction 'or him killing me.'

There was a long silence as Harry ran his finger over the scratched, uneven wooden surface unconsciously.

'Dumbledore told you this?' Lupin's voice sounded strange, so Harry lifted his gaze to him. He nodded his head. Lupin's expression was grave, and also unexpectedly angry. It was a while before he spoke again.

'I fear that is all you have to say on the subject then?' Lupin stood and walked to the kitchen bench. 'It's important you understand,' Harry said quietly, turning in his chair 'I'd ask for your help if I could, if I thought it would do any good.'

'I think I finally do understand.' He said slowly 'But I can't pretend that I don't find it more than a little frustrating.'

'I know, but there isn't anything else to say. The more people who know-'

'The greater the chance Voldemort will discover what you're up to.' Lupin finished 'It's okay. Under the circumstances it seems you might be safer doing things your way.' He said. He was focused on Harry with a look of grave concern. 'But remember, if you find yourself in trouble ... if you need to call on someone, I'll be there for you, no matter what.'

Harry would have liked to say a word of thanks to his father's once best friend, but a lump had swelled in his throat at Lupin's words. Instead, he nodded before turning back to the table.

'Why did you come anyway?' Lupin asked as he started pulling food from the cupboard. Harry had almost forgotten since so much had happened.

'I left something behind that I need for school tomorrow.'

'It might be best if you stayed the night now.' Lupin stopped and eyed Harry 'I'm not exactly the best cook in the world, but it'll be edible. And you look as if you could do with a decent meal.'

'Okay,' Harry stood and walked to the stairs 'I'll let Hermione know I won't be back until morning.'

'How?'

'Fred and George's handiwork, I'll bring it down and show you.'

As soon as Harry reached his room he closed the door and went over to the wardrobe. He pulled the scroll Snape had given him from his crumpled backpack. It had lain there since the night it had come into his possession, safest well away from Ron and Hermione's enquiring eyes. He turned it over in his hands, feeling relieved, yet slightly nauseated to be looking at it again, before replacing it and retrieving the small emerald message log. He wrote a brief note to advise Hermione of when he would be back, placed it in his pocket, and then he washed up and headed back downstairs.

Lupin was appreciative of the twins seemingly endless inventive magical abilities as Harry explained how it worked, and even though the log contained nothing anyone else could read in to, Harry was still eager to whisk it back into his pocket after Lupin's initial flick through. As Lupin stirred the pot on the stove, Harry tried to steer the conversation to what Lupin had been doing the last few weeks, but he would not be drawn into the subject, no matter how determined Harry had seemed.

Eventually he asked straight out what he thought Bill might have been up to, but understandably, Lupin explained that he wasn't able to tell him, even if it wasn't for the oath he took, as he had had no contact with anyone from The Order the whole time he had been underground. So Harry had to content himself with waiting in the hopes that Bill turned up in answer to Lupin's call.

Between reluctant mouthfuls of tinned stew, he took the opportunity to express his unease at Lupin's own situation. But as Lupin had readily pointed out, everyone was taking risks these days, and it was a necessary price to pay if it could make a difference in the war against Voldemort.

It was the early hours of the morning by the time Harry crawled between the sheets, Bill still yet to show. And though his mind was buzzing with the contents of his backpack, he managed to sleep fitfully until dawn. Bill still hadn't turned up when Harry appeared downstairs, though Tonks was there. Harry quizzed her immediately about Bill, uncaring that his interest in him all of a sudden appeared suspicious. He was bizarrely comforted by the fact that Tonks was adamant Bellatrix was still at large, but was unable to get any further information from her. She was somewhat preoccupied, and Harry noticed with dismay she seemed to tremble slightly when Lupin came into the room. Something Lupin also appeared to notice.

He told Harry that Sturgis and Kingsley had already taken Rosenberg away, all the while his eyes flickering to Tonks who had her back to them, pouring cereal into bowls. Harry hated to see the uncomfortable way they dealt with each other for the rest of the morning, but he had bigger things to worry about today.

With no further word on Bill all he could hope was that he was still a way off trying to close in on her. He left before first classes were due to start, taking his backpack with the scroll still inside, and after some awkward goodbyes, and a knowingly concerned look from Lupin, Harry reached Hogwarts, strolling up the grounds in the early morning light, making his way to the Common Room.

## 14. Neville's Return of the DA

As Harry passed the Great Hall, the clattering of plates and the chattering of students filtered through the open doors. He kept his cloak on until he reached the fat lady's portrait, where he slipped it off again, giving her quite a start.

'Ooh!' she said, sweepingly clutching at her chest 'I do wish you wouldn't! I lose ten flakes off my paint work every time you do that.'

'Sorry' he said. She breathed pointedly for a moment, continuing her dramatics, and then she straightened, obviously feeling her moment was over.

'That was quite a speech you gave last night.' she said, eyeing him with snobby appreciation. 'What happened after I left?' he asked hesitantly. An amused smile played across her lips.

'I've been hanging here for so long I've lost count of the years, and I have seen a thing or two in that time.' She looked at him under her brow 'One thing I've learned, is never underestimate the teenagers ability to ignore the truths of wisdom. What you said is exactly what they needed to hear, even if they don't know it yet.'

Harry sighed, 'Lobalug.'

'That's not the password.'

'What? It was last night when I left.' Harry frowned.

'True.' She had her hands, one over the other in front of her. Harry waited for a moment until it was clear she was not likely to say anything further.

'Well?' he said impatiently.

'Well what?' she raised an eyebrow. Harry let out his breath impatiently and turned to head down to the Great Hall.

'Where are you going?' the fat lady said indignantly.

'To find someone who will give me the new password!' exasperation laced his voice.

'Poppycock!'

'Pardon me?' Harry turned.

'The password, its "poppycock". One of the Slytherin sixth year Prefects chose it.'

'Poppycock?' He repeated. The portrait door swung open.

'Like I said, ignorance in the face of wisdom.' she added from behind the door.

The common room was practically empty, only Neville and Colin Creevey were sitting at one of the tables under a window. They looked extremely concerned over whatever it was they were writing, so much so, they didn't even notice when Harry crossed the floor and climbed the stairs to his room. As soon as he had placed the scroll safely at the bottom of his trunk, he shoved the backpack under his bed and pulled out some fresh clothes to change into. He welcomed the full day of classes ahead, figuring it would help to take his mind off the coming evening, which loomed over him like a dark shadow.

When he finally caught up with Ron and Hermione outside Charms class, they both looked tired and hassled. Harry was grateful they didn't start in on him for leaving them behind to deal with aftermath of his speech, but he couldn't help feeling guilty anyway as he tried to fill them in on his conversation with Lupin.

It proved awkward however; as Neville, Seamus and Dean kept hovering in the hopes that Harry might start sharing some of his information with them now as well. But this was not the sort of information he could share, and it made him feel doubly guilty when they finally gave up, taking the hint. He decided to not tell any of them about Lupin's attack, not even Ron or Hermione. He knew how Lupin felt about it, and it seemed to Harry that even though it had been a Death Eater that had been killed, Lupin was far from proud of it, and would wish as few people to know as possible.

Charms class seemed to drag, the normalness of it grating on Harry's nerves, making him moody and snappy. After waiting impatiently for weeks for his moment with Bellatrix, Harry was finding these last few hours unbearable. He wanted Bellatrix stopped and brought in to pay for her crimes, but the fact that it was Snape who had handed him the means to do it, left a bad taste in his mouth.

It was an understatement that something about it all didn't sit well with him, but what choice did he have? Bellatrix was destructive to the core, she held little or no regard for human life, except possibly her own, Harry thought viciously. He had to take the only opportunity he'd been given.

Harry went to the Great Hall with the others for lunch, though when he sat down to face the piles of steaming hot, meticulously prepared food, he had absolutely no appetite. As he sat watching people load their plates, Hermione started spooning peas and corn onto his, shooting him challenging looks.

'Don't bother. I'm not hungry.' He said. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

'What's going on Harry?'

'Nothing.'

'Come off it,' Ron interjected 'we know when something's up. Spill!'

'I'm waiting for the Halloween feast tonight.' Harry said truthfully. Hermione was still regarding him suspiciously.

'Oh really?' she said sarcastically 'I expect you'll eat loads then, of course.'

'That's right.' Harry said, getting more than a little irritated.

'Hey,' Neville had just arrived at the table. He sat down opposite Harry and handed Hermione a bit of parchment. 'This is the lot, so far. They're all set, they'll be ready when needed.' Hermione skimmed it quickly.

'I had hope there'd be more than this.' she frowned.

'I reckon there will be soon.' Neville said, smiling at Harry.

'What is it?' He asked.

'A list of people in the DA.' She said as she handed it to him. There were twelve people on the list. Harry, Hermione and Ron came first, followed by Neville, Dean and Seamus, then Ginny, Harry's stomach tightened at her name, then Luna and Ernie, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott and lastly Colin.

'No real surprises there,' Ron said, reading over Harry's shoulder.

'I haven't seen you organizing this.' Harry said, looking at Hermione questioningly.



'That's because I didn't. Neville did! All I did was enchant some more coins.'

Harry smiled at Neville who was blushing slightly. He had come to school this year with a determination that even surprised Harry. 'Actually, I was thinking ... we need to appoint a coordinator, someone in charge of keeping everyone updated. Make sure we're all on the ball. What do you think?' he asked.

'I-I thought that's what you three did?' Neville said tentatively.

'Harry's right,' Hermione chimed in. 'we're swamped, what with the Defence classes and everything. You'd be perfect for the job!'

'Well ... I-I guess...'

'Excellent!' Ron interrupted 'That's settled then, lets eat!'

Hermione prodded her finger at Harry's plate. 'All of us!' she said sternly.

Maybe it was Neville's pleasure at his new assignment, but Harry was suddenly not in the mood to argue. He picked up his fork and pierced a piece of cauliflower coated in cheese sauce, and lifting it under Hermiones watchful gaze, he shoved the whole thing into his mouth defiantly. Once he started chewing, it wasn't as difficult as he'd expected, and he finished off the cauliflower and started on some Brussels sprouts, aware that he had a long afternoon ahead of him.

Neville rushed down his food and then jumped up from the table and made a swift exit as Harry put his own fork down with still half a plate full of beefsteak and mushrooms left. He looked to the staff table.

McGonagall's eyes were roaming over the students, and Harry automatically followed her gaze. Everyone was chatting and tucking into their food as always, and it struck Harry how vulnerable they all were. Sharing the Gryffindor tower with the whole of the sixth and seventh years, and conducting the younger students in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, meant that unlike previous years, he recognized everyone's faces as he looked around.

Things had changed so much, that he couldn't help wondering if Hogwarts would ever be the same again. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of an assortment of brown and grey owls, flying in through the high windows and circling around the enchanted ceiling. Harry didn't bother to look for Hedwig, having pretty much given up on receiving any mail.

A magnificently sized tawny frogmouth owl landed in front of Hermione importantly. Its markings were striking; it's grey and brown feathers looked extremely well groomed and it's blue-black flecks lining the edge of its face and wings gave it a very regal appearance. Lifting its beak and leg in the air at the same time in a haughty and obviously well practiced manner, it waited for Hermione to untie the scroll from it's leg before launching itself with its impressive wingspan and swooping silently and elegantly over the tables and back up and out through the windows.

'Bloody show off.' Ron said sullenly, clutching Pig in his fist in an effort to stop him from leaving footprints all over his mashed potato as he danced around enthusiastically on Ron's plate. He pulled a message from Mrs. Weasley off the little owls leg, as Hermione opened the ornate blue wax seal on her scroll, unravelling it. She started reading it and then stood up, flushing brightly, and made to climb over the bench seat to leave, but Ron grabbed her arm, looking up at her guilty expression.

'Read it here.' He said, his face suddenly serious. Harry had guessed the same thing as Ron had, and took hold of her robes to urge her back down between them. She swung herself back down slowly and reluctantly opened the scroll once more. 'What does it say?'

Harry had never heard Ron speak so gravely to Hermione when she was so obviously embarrassed, he normally took the opportunity to tease her into a further state of red-faced flustering. He could sense there was trouble brewing.

Harry and Ron both leaned in so no one else would be privy to the contents of the letter as she took a deep breath, and read out quietly.

'Dearest Hermione' she spoke in a squeaky telltale voice that she was very uncomfortable sharing this with them. After reading ahead a couple of lines to herself, she seemed to decide she could not go through with reading it aloud, and held the letter away from her so that Harry and Ron could

peer over her arms.

*'I was rather surprised, and yet somewhat delighted, to hear from you. I always suspected there was a little spark between us. You were frequently attentive to me in our DA classes together. I will admit, of course, I noticed you too, though I have to say, your abrupt manner was a trifle off-putting.'*

'Prat!' Ron said ungraciously, 'Never figured out it was just him you were abrupt with then?'

*'You obviously tried to catch my eye on more than one occasion last year, but I always rather thought you had another target for your affections in mind. Still, it is said you should never try to second guess a woman in love.'*

'Git!' Ron scoffed, obviously cheesed-off. Hermione was cringing in her chair.

*'Friends of the family are hosting a Champagne and Lobster dinner party next week, there will be a number of young suitors attending, both male and female, and although I am one of the most sort after bachelors that frequents these suppers, I have yet to procure myself a partner. I am prepared to take you as my date, though you must remember we move in high social circles and your conversation and dress standard would need to suit.'*

'What an insufferable snob.' The distaste in Hermione's voice unmistakeable.

*'I await your reply; though don't leave it too long, I am likely to be snapped up soon by some other lovely young lady otherwise.'*

*Yours most sincerely,*

*Zacharias Smith'*

'Doesn't sound like he's exactly head over heels,' Ron muffled a smirk with his hand. 'Maybe you haven't made the love potion strong enough.'

'I haven't used it yet!' Hermione scowled at him. 'This is just his own delusional take on things.' Ron suddenly didn't seem to find it so funny anymore.

'What? You mean he likes you anyway ... without the potion?'

'Is that so hard to believe?' she said a little angrily.

'Well, no. Its just ... we didn't bargain on that, did we?' Harry watched Ron, as he gradually turned pink. 'I mean, its going to make the potion's effects stronger isn't it? And what happens when you're finished with him? He might not be easy to get rid of. What are you going to do then?'

'Ron, it's a potion, when its worn off he'll go back to normal, normal for him anyway.' Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

'Yeah, but he likes you, and by the sound of things, the only reason he hasn't approached you because you treat him like the pretentious boob he is!' he frowned.

'It wont be a problem Ron, he's far too narcissistic to swoon over me for long once the effects wear off.' She waved her hand at him impatiently.

'I don't know' Harry said.

'Not you too?' she sighed.

'It could be difficult, now that he's already shown a genuine interest you. A love potion's usually used on people who lack those feelings isn't it. Don't you think it will heighten the effect?' Harry said cautiously, knowing Hermione wasn't in the best of moods now.

'Maybe, until it wears off, but its only for a short time. Don't worry!' she said, looking from one to the other. Ron did not look as if she had put him at ease at all, and Harry couldn't blame him. Zach was extraordinarily arrogant and was rather thick skinned. He wasn't the sort who was used to taking no for an answer. Harry wondered if under the circumstances, he would have let Ginny do it in her place.

It was then that Harry realized he hadn't seen Ginny. He looked around searchingly. Lunch was almost over, and the plates would be cleared any minute.

'Where's Ginny?' he asked of no one in particular, his voice louder than before.

'I saw her up in the common room before I came down.' Lavender, who was sitting nearby offered 'I asked her if she was coming, but she said her and Luna had something to do.' Harry frowned, for some inexplicable reason he had the distinct feeling her absence meant she was up to something. Before he could think about it any longer, the plates vanished and the remaining people in the Hall straggled out.

Harry headed off to his private session with Sir, while Ron left for the Common Room to study, and Hermione drifted off to Arithmancy. Harry had learned over the past few weeks that he could expect anything when he entered the classroom, so he was already preparing himself as he walked down the corridor.

A strange feeling was growing in him, and he scoffed at his own over-sensitivity, before hearing the faintest crackling sound behind him. He reacted before he could think, and dropped to the floor, rolling on his back with his shoulders off the ground, and his wand gripped firmly in both hands, staring in the direction the hex had come from. The coat of armour behind him clanged and clattered as the beam of light hit it. Harry was panting as he scrambled to his feet, still unable to see where the attack had come from.

'You walked straight past me.' Sir grunted 'I could have hit you at point blank range.' Harry was searching the area in front of him. Slowly Sir came into view, seeming to melt out of the wall, the disillusionment charm he had been hiding under reversing.

'How am I supposed to fight something that's invisible?' Harry said wearily as he got to his feet and replaced his wand in his robes.

'If you can't figure that out, then you're not going to last long.' He said without looking at him, as he opened the door to the classroom. Harry followed him in.

'You're asking the impossible.' he said under his breath.

'The impossible?' Sir turned on him suddenly 'What is it you think we have been doing here, Potter?' Harry could tell this was one of those questions Sir deliberately asked, knowing Harry would not give him the answer he wanted.

'You're teaching me how to duel and-'

'Wrong! You already know how to duel; you've proved it on quite a number of occasions. Do you think McGonagall would've trusted the education of the younger students to you if you couldn't teach them how to defend themselves?' He turned away from Harry again and walked down to the cleared area in front of his desk.

Harry stayed where he was. Sir had a way of making him feel incredibly stupid and naive at times like this. 'What was your instinct as you were walking down that corridor?' he asked Harry challengingly.

'I felt like I was being watched.' He said reluctantly.

'And yet you chose not to act on it. Why?'

'I thought I was being paranoid.' He said quietly, his eyes on the floor space between them. Sir jutted a finger at him pointedly.

'Trust your instincts. They are the main reason you are standing here today.'

'How do I know when I'm right?' Harry asked, walking towards him slowly.

'Feel it. I was under a disillusionment charm and that leaves a mark. Magic leaves a mark.'

That night in the cave Dumbledore had been able to sense enchantments, pinpoint them with an accuracy that had mystified Harry at the time. Now that he thought about it, Harry had also been quite certain that years ago his invisibility cloak had not fooled Dumbledore when they had stood in the same room as each other whilst he wore it. Sir was watching Harry when he finally met his gaze.

'Can you teach me to sense magic?' he asked, it seemed almost impossible to Harry.

'You already can, though you still have a long way to go if it's going to be of any real use to you. You have to learn to trust your instincts.'

Harry nodded slightly. Then another thought occurred to him.

'Can you teach me Occlumency?'

'Learning how to sense magic is the most useful ways of detecting when someone is trying to enter your mind. You can block it before they even get close.' He seemed intensely focused on Harry.

'But that's the problem; I can't block it, I've tried.' Harry said gravely. Sir studied Harry for a moment.

'First things first, if you're going to stay alive long enough to worry about having your thoughts read, then you need more drilling. I think its time we moved outside.'

They spent the rest of the session hovering on the edges of the Dark Forest, Harry moving through the trees, waiting for Sir to strike. It was the most arduous session Harry had been put through yet. A couple of times Harry spent almost twenty minutes by his reckoning, waiting for some sign of Sir's attack. It was too easy to drop his guard when he was tiring from a constant state of alertness, and Abe seemed to know exactly when to strike to get the maximum impact.

On the first lengthy wait, Harry had wielded a spectacular shield charm just in the nick of time, trusting in his instinct, though he had already cast the shield charm several times previously as a false alarm. The second time however, he was wearying, and found himself flung against a nearby tree trunk, unable to react in time to deflect the stun. When Sir had enervated him back to consciousness, he had felt extremely agitated and a embarrassed that he was still getting caught.

His body ached and he felt stretched, pushed to the point of exhaustion as he headed back up to the Common Room. When he climbed through the portrait hole, he was met by wary looks from the other students that littered the area. Harry knew it was primarily because he looked terrible, and he suspected they still feared he might launch into another rant given any sort of provocation.

Ron and Hermione, were sat with most of the other DA members, only Ginny seemed absent, yet again. They all looked up at him with varying degrees of worried or dubious expressions.

'What is he doing to you?' Hermione asked, a deep frown etched across her face. It appeared she spoke for all of them as they stared at him.

'Preparing me.' Harry said flatly 'I'm going to get some sleep. Wake me around five will you?' he directed at Ron.

'Maybe you should stay in bed for the night, you look awf-'

'NO!' Harry directed far to sharply at Ron, his tiredness getting the better of him. 'I don't want to miss the feast, I mean.' He added in a more controlled voice.

'You wont really be missing much,' Dean said.

'Yeah, it's the same thing every year, nothing special.' Added Seamus. Harry sighed in a clearly irritated way.

'If you wont wake me, I'll stay up.' He said as he threw himself on the sofa beside Luna. He noticed instantly that Ron and Hermione were glaring at him questioningly. He knew what they would be thinking. He had shown so little interest in food lately, that they were finding it hard to swallow that he was suddenly so desperate to go to the Halloween feast to gorge himself.

'I'll wake you.' Luna volunteered 'You won't want to miss the Puffle Crubwoofats!'

'Er ... the what?' asked Hannah hesitantly.

'Puffle Crubwoofats. They only come out on Halloween, and even then only every sixteenth one.' She said. 'And tonight is the night.' She said, her protuberant eyes widening in anticipation.

'And what, dare I ask, is a Puffed Snub-hoofer?' Ernie asked.

'Puffle Crubwoofat' she corrected him 'It a pumpkin headed creature that runs up to your front door, knocks, and then runs away again.'

'What's the point in that?' Ron screwed his face up.

'When the owner of the house comes out, they appear from behind the bushes in groups of five or six at a time, then they light their heads up and perform a most interesting re-enactment of the greatest love story ever to come out of their culture.'

'Er ... why?' Susan looked completely befuddled.  
'Oh, it's a long story-'

'Well, I think I'll hear about it another time, Luna' Harry stood up again 'don't forget, wake me at five, okay?'  
'Have a good sleep. Anyway' Luna turned back to her reluctant audience 'Legend has it...'

Harry was once again aware that Hermione and Ron's suspicious gazes were following him as he headed up the stairs. It was just after three pm, which meant he had almost two hours to catch up on some sleep. He had no idea what he would be called upon to do this evening, but in his current state, he wouldn't stand much of a chance against Bella, so some sleep was essential. He didn't bother changing, or getting under the covers. He collapsed onto his bed, pulling the curtains together to shut out the light, and laid back.

When he finally awoke, he remembered nothing after his head had hit the pillow. Luna came into focus, standing over him as he put his glasses on. The room was dark, lit only by a low lamp.

'Harry'  
'Thanks Luna, what time is it?' he asked groggily.  
'Almost six,' she said vaguely.  
'What?' Harry suddenly threw his feet on the floor, shaking his head clear. He stood up and opened his trunk hurriedly, fumbling with the latch in his haste. 'Why didn't you wake me earlier?' he said angrily.

'The others seemed to think I should let you sleep. I had to sneak away from them in the end as they were heading to the Great Hall. I managed to lose them on the stairwell.'

Harry barely heard her as he rummaged through his gear, finally locating the scroll and slamming the lid down behind him. He took off out the door, Luna calling after him to wait, so he turned and took a few steps back towards her, grabbed her hand, and pulled her after him, going as briskly as she would allow.

'You really are looking forward to the feast, aren't you?' she said dreamily.

## 15. The Seige Of Bellatrix

'You go in!' Harry let go of Luna's hand as he slowed outside the Great Hall. 'I'll be there in a minute.' He picked up his pace again as he veered off to the clock tower, wishing he had bothered to replace the watch he had drowned in the lake years before. He stopped beneath the enormous clock face and looked up as the gigantic pendulum swung before him. He backed away so he could see the hands more accurately.

He still had roughly three minutes. He took off, back inside and brought himself to a controlled walk before he stepped inside the Hall, positioning himself just inside the doorway.

The room was decorated in true Halloween tradition. Black candles and glowing pumpkins, and magical bats circling the star filled ceiling. Everyone was already enjoying the Halloween treats that lined the tables. As he stood there, adrenalin coursing through his body, waiting to hear the deep resonating chimes of the clock tower once it struck six o'clock, he noticed Ron and Hermione determinedly walking towards him. He tucked the scroll behind his leg and shifted from foot to foot, his nerves alive with impatience and foreboding.

'What are you doing?' Ron winced as he pulled up in front of Harry 'You're sweating ... are you ill?'  
'Probably, but that's not the only problem, is it?' Hermione looked at him through narrowed eyes.

'Not now!' Harry would have to put them off for a couple more minutes. Whatever was about to happen, he couldn't bring Snapes name into it. If this was going to be the downfall of Bellatrix LeStrange, then he instinctively wanted to guard where the information had come from.

Snapes motives had haunted his thoughts over the past few weeks, and nothing Harry pieced together seemed very likely. He clung to his idea that Snape and Bellatrix were competing to be Voldemorts top man, but however he had looked at it, he couldn't figure out why Snape had chosen to eliminate his competitor using Harry. Unless of course, this was a trap, which had seemed less likely the more he had tossed it around in his head. Snape had already proved he could reach Harry easily at Grimmauld Place, so why would he go to such trouble to ensnare him? Too much could go wrong by waiting so long.

'We're beginning to really worry about you, mate.' Ron said gravely 'I thought you trusted us? You used to tell us what you were up to. I can't figure it out,' he shook his head 'what's changed? We know something's going on, we know you're keeping something from us.'

'I can't explain it to you.' Harry said shortly, listening for the first clang of the bell. 'That's not good enough, not anymore.' Hermione frowned 'you've been expecting something, haven't you? And judging by the way you're behaving, it's about to happen.' taking in his fidgeting.

Harry could feel his movements were uncoordinated and nerve driven, as he avoided their questions and waited for the low echoing toll of the bell.

It should come any second now.

'I'll call you if I need you.'

'Need us for what?' Ron pried

'I don't know yet.'

'Your not making any sense.' Hermione continued to watch him.

He was so close to finding out what Snapes warning was all about. Any second he would know what to do. He looked at his friend's worried faces; they were about to find out anyway.

'I have to open this in here,' he said agitatedly, lifting the scroll for them to see 'and I don't want anyone else to see it until I know what it is.'

'What is it?' Hermione frowned.

'*I don't know*, a warning maybe.'

'We can see it though, right?' Ron pushed.

'I won't know until I've read it!'

'Harry, this is sounding ridiculously dangerous, where did you get it?' Trust Hermione to ask the hard questions. Harry looked around the room, not at all sure what he was looking for. 'Who gave it to you?' she demanded.

*DONNNNG!*

Harry straightened suddenly and drew a deep breath. This was it. It was finally time.

He placed the scroll between both hands and placed his fingers under the wax, trying to lift the blood red seal. It wouldn't budge. He gripped the edges of the hard wax firmly and squeezed, snapping the seal instantly. It hissed and fizzled as a small ribbon of smoke rose from the crack.

For a split second, Harry thought it might burst into flames, fearing he had got it wrong somehow. But the whiff of smoke dissipated and Harry unrolled the parchment with shaky hands. His eyes scanned down the writing, immediately recognizing it as the same cramped hand that Snapes potions book had scrawled all through it. Ron and Hermione were watching him, their own suspenseful agitation growing as he studied the parchment.

He took a sharp intake of breath.

'What?' Ron asked 'What's it say?' Harry began to shake his head.

'I-I don't believe it...' he said quietly, baffled as he kept following the writing down the page.  
'Harry! What is it?' Hermione's alarmed voice intruded as he tried to take in what he was seeing.  
'I-I don't understand...' He swore as his breathing became rapid, his fear rising.  
'What is it?' Hermione repeated loudly. Ron moved to look at the parchment.

'It's a warning, and a spell, but...' feeling panic rising in him, Harry continued 'There are symbols ... I've got no idea what they mean. It looks like each has got a set of instructions to them.' He swore again. All thoughts of hiding the contents of the scroll were forgotten in his need. 'If I don't figure out what all of this means in the next four minutes, Bellatrix will succeed at doing something a hell of a lot worse than what she did at the wedding.' he said, a sick feeling growing in his stomach as he held out the parchment.

Hermione grabbed the piece of paper as she and Ron squinted at the tiny wording, reading down the page. He watched as a look of horror crept across their faces. Ron swore and Hermione's eyes watered.

'Where did you get this?' she breathed 'Is it right?'

Harry ran a hand through his already unkempt hair. 'I don't know. We can't afford to ignore it though, can we? If we do and it is right ... then we won't be able to prevent her ...' his mind raced at the thought.

'But Harry, who gave this to you?'  
'Don't ask me that, it doesn't matter' Harry snapped, annoyed at her persistence. 'The point is we have to act on it.'  
'But this could be a mistake?'  
'Whatever it is, it is not a mistake.' He said angrily. He felt like too much time was slipping by while they argued the point. Hermione looked back at the parchment.

'Hang on mate, calm down. Hermione?' Ron tried to ease Harry's growing temper before throwing a look at Hermione. 'Can you tell what he's supposed to do with the symbols?'  
'I should be able to, but I'll need time. It's some form of runes, but it's complicated, they're worked in with the spell.' she said with a frown.

Harry glared at her. 'We don't have time. The parchment won't last. We need to commit it to memory.'  
'To memory?' Hermione's eyes grew wide. 'Now?'  
'Yes!' he said impatiently.  
'If we get it wrong, even a little, the spell won't work.' She said.  
'That's why we need to stop wasting time!'  
'But-'

'Harry's normally right about this sort of thing Hermione.' Ron added quickly. 'He was right about Malfoy, wasn't he? He was right about Snape?'  
Harry swallowed; Ron had unknowingly touched on the doubts that plagued his mind.  
'What if we each memorize a symbol and its instructions; it shouldn't be too hard between the three of us. Let's have a look at it.' Ron waved her to hold it out for all of them to see. She held it up and Ron and Harry closed in on it.

'I should be able to work it out, but we have to get it right. I'll take the first one Ron, you take the second, and Harry, you memorize this last one. And remember, some of the symbols can look almost the same, but their meanings are very different. We have to get it right!' she spoke quickly as they studied the page. They were silent for a moment, and Harry registered out of the corner of his eye Ron mouthing the words as he read over them.

'How long do we have?' Ron asked finally.  
'We must be almost out of time.' Harry said and he started reading over the instructions for the fourth time.

'What happens when the time is up-' But as Ron spoke, the parchment began to bubble as if it were immersed in acid. Hermione dropped it, gasping as smoke began drifting off the page slowly. They watched it fizzle on the floor, curling in on itself as it blackened, until eventually there was only a

delicate charcoal skeleton left. Ron crouched down, but it crumbled the moment his fingers touched it. 'So, what do we do know?' he asked as he stood again, rubbing his blackened fingertips together.

'We have to warn McGonagall.' Hermione said as she looked to the staff table. All of the teachers appeared oblivious to the trio at the other end of the room, though as he looked around, Harry noticed Neville was staring at them from the Gryffindor table. He beckoned him over to where they were standing, and Neville jumped up with surprising speed.

'Neville can warn her, or we'll be stuck here as soon as she finds out what's going on.' He explained. 'You're right. There's no way she'd let us out without proof we can help.' Ron concurred.

'What's happening?' Neville already looked extremely worried as he looked between them. 'Something's coming to Hogsmeade Neville ... something bad, and I need you to alert McGonagall.' Harry said, holding Neville's gaze.

'Of course,' Neville nodded as he swallowed.

'She would try and stop us if she found out what we were up to, so you're going to have to give us time to get away. And get the DA ready, but stay here, okay?' Harry said, his hand on Neville's chest 'you're backup only, just in case our defence doesn't work. We've only got one chance at this Neville. One go, or she'll succeed in destroying the town.'

'Who?' Neville asked. Harry watched for Neville's reaction as he spoke.

'Bellatrix LeStrange.' He knew this would have an impact on Neville, and sure enough his face changed, hardening to a look Harry had never seen on him before.

'Are you okay?' he asked slowly.

'I'll do it, you can count me in, Harry.' Neville said.

'Tell McGonagall Bellatrix has found a way to control Quintapeds, and she's going to unleash them on Hogsmeade in less than an hour.'

Neville's face dropped 'Quintapeds?'

'Yes' Hermione said pointedly.

'We think we have a way of stopping them. We're going to head there now.' Harry said quickly.

'Give us fifteen minutes before you go to McGonagall. She'll know what to do.'

'Alright' Neville said 'but how will I know if you need us?'

Harry thought about it for a moment. He hadn't really seriously considered bringing the DA to the fight; there would be enough witches and wizards in Hogsmeade that would be forced to make a stand when it came to it.

'I'll send my patronus, a stag. If you see it from the tower, that's the signal to come.' Neville looked a little unsure, but nodded slowly.

'Remember, give us fifteen minutes, okay?'

He nodded again and Harry, Ron and Hermione left the Hall.

~\*~\*~\*~

'Quintapeds!' Ron said darkly as they closed the Hogwarts gates behind them, resetting the locks.

'Disgusting creatures.' Hermione said dejectedly.

'They're just Voldemort's style, aren't they?' Harry remembered vividly what he had read about them in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. They came from a small, unlovely island off the Northernmost tip of Scotland, and had a mythical background due to the fact that nobody was really able to get close enough to study them owing to their liking for human flesh. What was known about them was that they were rather hairy and had the unusual claim of having five legs.

The trio disappeared, and then re-appeared outside the Three Broomsticks. The golden light that spilled out onto the street from the pub looked warm and inviting, and as they peered through the windows they could see that it was a busy night for these times when few would venture out after hours. The Halloween spirit was captured with large photos of hag-like witches scowling down from the walls, and ghostly shaped candles dotting the tables.

'Wish we could go in for a firewhiskey or two before we get started. Now we're actually allowed.'



Ron said glumly.

'C'mon, we have to get this set up before they get here.' Harry led them away from the comforting chatter into the dully lit and quietly haunting streets.

Harry pulled out his cloak and threw it over them. They huddled together and wrapped their arms around themselves in the chill as they moved swiftly, not daring to run. Snapes message had warned Death Eaters might be at large so they had to avoid being seen. Harry found himself trusting in his gut feeling more and more, reminding himself of what Abe had told him earlier that day.

Harry had known when he read the parchment that he couldn't do it alone, and Snape knew his limitations, as much as he knew Hermione's talent. The spell would take all three of them. This was the reason he had insisted Harry be in the Hall when he opened the scroll, it was the best way to ensure he would be around the help he needed.

The cool night air bit through their meagre clothing. The sky was cloudless and starry, and the moonlight lit up the surrounding houses and hills in its bluish glow, giving no hint as to the danger that lurked. They walked some distance past the little teashop Harry had once gone to with Cho, on their first, and last date. He pulled off the cloak.

'It said to put the first mark somewhere here, right?' he asked as he watched Hermione pace the ground.

'The position of them doesn't have to be perfect, what really matters is getting the symbols right.' She said 'As long as they make a triangle, it'll work.' She took out her wand and pointed it at the ground. Ron and Harry watched as she drew a white shape on the cobbled pavement resembling a large W, mirror reflected at the bottom peaks, drawing it out in exactly the order that had been written below the symbol on the parchment. Next to it she put what looked like an upside Y with a bar across the bottom and joined the two symbols with three parallel lines, one above, one through the centre, and one below. She stopped and breathed out loudly.

'That's one.' She said.

'Let's go.' Harry urged. Ron was rubbing his arms against the chill as Harry threw his cloak back over them. They walked back down the way they had come.

The streets were empty; the only people they passed along the way was a tall weathered looking man, and a mildly pretty young woman with shoulder length blonde hair.

When they reached the lane that led out to the back of the town, they stopped, emerging from under the cloak.

'This will do.' Hermione said 'Ron?'

Ron took his wand out and did the same as he had seen Hermione do, this time the symbol was a square with a diamond laid over the top of it, and something that resembled the letter P, but with two extra arms attached next to it with what looked like feet. Ron was repeating it in the exact order he had read, when he suddenly stopped, unsure of where to put the joining lines.

'Ron!' Hermione glared at him. He frowned at the ground and then moved his wand to complete the mark, finishing his part of the spell.

'I hope that's right.' She chided.

'It is.' He said guiltily.

'We'd better get moving.' Harry said before Hermione could say anything more scathing.

When Harry had completed the last of the symbols on the road that led to the Shrieking Shack, they headed back to the Three Broomsticks.

'McGonagall would have called The Order by now.' he said as they hurried up the street, trying to keep their feet beneath the cloak.

'I wonder how many of them will come?' Ron muttered. It was true that they all seemed so busy these days that it was unlikely there would be many of them able to be reached.

'As long as this works, and its not just some elaborate plan to get Harry standing unprotected in the middle of Hogsmeade, we should be alright.' Hermione said, glancing at Harry. 'Rune triangles were

used in the old days. Its said that power can be channelled through the corners and forced to meet in the centre, colliding and combining at the same time.'

'If we got it right. It's going to take one heck of a spell to banish a hundred Quintapedes!' Harry added under his breath. Hermione didn't answer; instead she shuddered, the thought of getting it wrong seemingly to ghastly to contemplate.

When they reached the outside of the pub, they stopped and eyed the people inside.

'They've got no idea what's coming, maybe we should warn them.' Hermione's face creased with concern.

'They're safer inside.' Harry said and removed the cloak. He motioned his head at the two figures walking towards them. McGonagall and Slughorn had apparated into the middle of the street, Harry not at all surprised to see them.

'Potter! What's going on? What's all this talk about Quintapedes attacking Hogsmeade?' she asked it angrily, but he could tell she was worried.

'Surely you can't be serious? Quintapedes are wild, they wont be working for the-'

'They are.' Harry interrupted Slughorn. 'He's found a way to control them, and Bellatrix is bringing them here, tonight.' McGonagall's lips thinned.

'How do you know?' she asked.

'I just do.'

Slughorn looked thoroughly unconvinced, fearful even, but McGonagall took Harry aside and spoke to him in a hushed voice.

'How do you know?'

'If I told you, you wouldn't like it.' Harry said.

'Try me.' She retorted. He tried to read her expression, her mouth was set harshly, but her eyes held doubt. He took a deep breath.

'I cant.' He breathed out resignedly. As much as he wanted to share this particular piece of information with her, he instinctively knew he shouldn't.

She sniffed impatiently. 'I really think if Dumbledore trusted me, you could too.'

'It's not a matter of trust.' He said, 'If anyone else were to find out, well ... next time there wouldn't be a warning.' He almost couldn't believe he was saying it. Did he really think Snape would tip them off a second time?

She looked intensely irritated. 'What is this way of stopping the attack Mr. Longbottom was talking about?'

'It's a spell, a complicated one, but we've already set it up.'

'Set it up?'

'Yes, Hermione says it follows the old ways, but it's powerful. We've put down a rune triangle.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Miss Granger came up with it?'

'No.' There was a couple of popping noises nearby.

'You stay put. Do you understand?' she poked a finger at him.

'I'm not going anywhere.'

Lupin and Tonks began sprinting as soon as their feet hit the ground, their cloaks billowing around them. Harry heard another crack behind them and turned to see Hestia standing underneath the Three Broomsticks sign.

'What is it? We came as soon as we got your message.' Lupin slowed and eyed Harry with a frown.

'What are you doing here?'

Harry was impressed at the ease with which McGonagall deflected Lupins questions, while informing the three new arrivals of the Quintapedes impending attack. She explained what was about to happen expertly as if it had all come from her.

'I have to get back to Hogwarts, in case the students come under threat. I have confined them to their dormitories, but I fear they will not all stay there.' She glanced at Harry out of the corner of her eye. 'I'll leave you to deal with things here, Remus. Professor Slughorn...' she motioned to him and he nodded, looking rather relieved to be leaving.

'Of course.' Lupin said. They disappeared, leaving Lupin staring at Harry.

'We don't have much time.' Harry said pointedly.

'What's this spell McGonagall was talking about?' Lupin asked.

'The three of us can do it,' Harry answered 'but you have to let the Quintapedes into town.' Lupin frowned 'you've got to draw them in so we can banish them. It only works inside the triangle.'

'Are you sure about this Harry? There are still a lot of people in Hogsmeade.' Ron and Hermione were watching him. He could be wrong, but he had to make a choice.

'I'm sure.' feeling rather sick as he said it.

'What's going on?' The appearance of so many people outside the pub had attracted some of the patrons from inside to investigate.

Harry heard a couple more cracks, and saw some more Order members joining them, as Lupin herded the wizards back inside. It was obvious he had the same thought as Harry; he wanted to avoid an all out panic. Lupin sent Kingsley into the pub to explain what was happening; knowing that some people would chose to go home to their families. By the time the Order had navigated a plan to draw the Quintapedes in, Harry, Ron and Hermione moved to make their final mark on the ground.

There was a distant sound of wands firing, growing from the main entrance to Hogsmeade, along with the intermittent cracks of wizards appearing to help in the struggle. Word must be spreading, Harry thought, watching as Lupin made sure the new arrivals were informed of the plan.

Then a few things happened in quick succession.

A wizard came running up the main street, seemingly surprised at the gathering before him, yelling and panting desperately that huge hairy monsters had entered the town through the front gate, and would be in the centre within minutes. Then an Order member that had been sent to keep watch, apparated before the pub and informed Lupin the creatures were circling the town, and would be moving in from all sides. The lookout posted at the door of the Three Broomsticks ducked back inside to pass on the news that the monsters were here, prompting them to pull down the blinds in what seemed to Harry, a futile effort to avoid detection.

He saw the tall weathered man grab hold of the young blonde woman's arm in an effort to restrain her from leaving the building for which Harry was glad, it would be difficult to have even more people on the streets to defend. She looked extraordinarily angry as the last blind was closed and they disappeared from view, throwing the street into gloomy foreshadowing.

'Alright, everyone get into position!' Lupin yelled at the remaining wizards who hadn't left to help defend innocents. They took up positions at the surrounding street entrances, effectively encircling the trio. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood in the centre of the main road, Hermione directing them nervously as each drew a long straight line across the ground in front of them, joining the ends to make the final triangle.

'That's it!' she said, her voice unmistakably shaky. They moved to stand within the triangle and turned their backs on each other. The surrounding night sky was flashing with shots fired from the numerous wizards on the outer edges of the town, and the crackling of misfired curses hitting the surrounding buildings was growing louder.

Then all of a sudden, the noise dropped off and things went deathly quiet.

All Harry could hear was Ron and Hermione's rapid breathing, as he held his own breath. The quiet stillness was worse than the fighting. The other wizards tensed, and it seemed to Harry the silence lasted hours, but it must have only been a few short seconds.

Then people were yelling again, their voices much closer than before, the flashes of light erupting once more, this time bouncing off the nearby shops and houses. Order members started appearing in the main street as they backed away from the onslaught, firing hexes pointedly. Harry knew the creatures were close as Lupin and the others joined in the struggle, wishing he were free to go to their aid. But he had his job to do. Then he caught his first glimpse of a Quintaped.

Its sturdy, hairy legs, as tall as a man, appeared first. Then its dense, low-slung body came into

view from around the building in front of him. It was a monstrous sight as its wide mouth with jagged teeth became visible through its thick brown fur. The two wizards standing before it backed away from the spider-like Quintaped as they fired at it in terror.

'I hope you know what your doing!' Lupin yelled urgently over his shoulder, still from some distance away. Harry's heartbeat raced. He had to be right about this. If he was wrong, if the spell didn't do as Snape said it would... Suddenly Harry was overcome by a wave of nausea. He could hear Hermiones gasps and Ron swearing behind him, and looking around he could see the creatures were appearing on all sides. There were stunning flashes shooting through the air before him, but they seemed to have little effect, the beasts starting briefly, as if they had been struck, then renewing their slow approach with fevered anger.

'Lets do it!' Ron said

'We have to wait until the last possible moment.' Harry said determinedly, but his thoughts were not as sure. This was all wrong. This is exactly what Snape wanted. They would have no hope of defending the town when the spell failed.

'Harry!' Lupin was firing off curses from his wand as he pushed Tonks behind him, backing towards the trio as the monsters pressed in.

Not yet, Harry thought. He watched as the circle of wizards closed in on them, he could feel Hermione's body trembling against his.

'Harry...' her voice quivered softly. It's not time, he thought, aware at Hermione's growing doubt at his continued silence.

'They're getting awfully close, mate!' Ron sounded angry. Harry watched as the defenders of the town started touching shoulder to shoulder, the horrific beasts flashing their teeth and eyeing them greedily.

Almost there.

Harry could see the tears in Tonks eyes as she frantically fired off shots. The Quintapedes were thick in the streets, pushing in on one another in their effort to get to the reluctant feast.

'Get ready,' he said finally, as he raised his wand in front of him. The three of them stood in the corners of the triangle, back to back, their shoulders touching, and their arms stretched out, pointing their wands directly above their heads.

'Harry!' Lupin was only a couple of feet away from him now. Tonks turned to look at Harry briefly, a silent plea in her eyes.

'Do it!' Ron's voice urged.

'NOW!' Harry yelled forcefully.

Three beams of greyish white light streaked from their wands and soared into the endless sky as they recited the words that had been spelled out for them. Harry could feel his wand starting to vibrate as the beams became thicker, brighter, the spell gathering momentum. The Quintapedes were slowly becoming more aware of the glowing spectacle; many closest to them had stopped attacking, and were beginning to back up, unable to get far, trapped by the masses pushing in behind them.

Harry looked up as his wand shuddered. The beams of light coiled around one another, intertwining and strengthening, becoming one. The air around him became turbulent and suffocating. Cloaks were flying about the wizard's bodies, being drawn into what felt like a vacuum, sucking the very air into the triangle violently. Harry could feel the power coursing through his body; it was unlike anything he had ever felt before. He was overcome with a desperate need to vent it, and yelled to his companions to release the spell. His voice carried away with the force of the rushing air but he could feel they were acting as one. Slowly they brought their arms down rigidly in front of them. The light flashed and crackled as it separated into three brilliantly white arcs that emanated from the wand tips, and remained joined above their heads.

Harry's body jolted as the power flow reversed itself. The ground beneath them shook as the surrounding buildings vibrated threateningly, the Quintapedes desperately trying to scatter in fear as

Lupin grasped Tonks and shielded her body, the others bracing themselves.

Suddenly, a dome of light exploded over the trio's heads and expanded rapidly. Harry's body relaxed instantly as the power left him. He watched, as it was unleashed on their unwitting targets.

The spell had a devastating effect.

High pitched, ear piercing squeals filled the air as the light passed forcefully, yet harmlessly over the people, and racked over the Quintapedes. They writhed at its touch, their legs curling underneath their bulbous bodies before shrivelling as if all of the life had been sucked out of them. Harry looked away repulsed. He had not expected it to be so vulgar and the guilt swelled in him. Hermione had her face buried in Ron's shoulder, his hand resting on the back of her hair protectively. They were both as appalled at the resulting carnage as he was. The beasts screeched and gurgled as they collapsed in on themselves, falling like hairy dominos.

As the screams of the monsters faded, Harry became aware of another sound; a bloodcurdling shriek from a woman's voice. It was not a yell for help, but a scream of blind fury and frustration.

*Bellatrix!*

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry gripped his wand with both hands, searching for his target.

Bellatrix was standing before the laneway, black cloaked, mask in hand as she looked around at her fallen army. A dozen Death Eaters stood in her wake, all surveying the hairy bodies that littered the streets.

*'You!'* she screeched as she caught sight of Harry and lifted her wand. *'You've interfered for the last time!'*

*'Harry!'* Lupin called out as a red jet of light shot towards Harry, but he was ready for it. He dived and hit the ground, and as he scrambled to his feet, he saw Ron, dragging Hermione by the hand as he ran for the cover of a nearby Alley. As another jet of light screamed towards him he took cover behind the bulk of a dead Quintaped. The noise of the curses hitting solid brick could be heard as the Order members joined in the fighting, yelling instructions to one another as the Death Eaters moved in.

The door to the pub before him opened suddenly. A middle-aged wizard brandishing his wand leapt out onto the street, only to be pushed to ground by Hestia as a green beam of light soared above them.

*'Julie!'* Harry heard Madame Rosmerta yell from within as the young blonde woman from before, ran out of the doorway, crouched with her wand in hand, taking cover behind a nearby cart.

He could feel the beads of sweat forming on his brow as he peered out from behind the hairy mass to see beams of light shooting in every direction. The wizards who had stood together against the Quintapedes, now scattered as they urgently sought cover. He searched the area before him with only one target in mind.

Bellatrix was moving through the main street, eyes fixed on the spot where he had taken shelter, obviously just as determined to seek him out. Knowing he couldn't stay where he was, he took a deep breath, and threw himself forward. Scrambling to his feet, he bolted towards the nearest cover; a small laneway that lay alongside the boarded up Zonko's.

He felt the curse fired as it careered towards his back, and dived onto the hard cobbled pavement. The white beam soared over him by only inches and collided with the building before him, sending bricks and mortar flurrying down over Harry.

He clawed his way to his feet again and in a low crouch, moved quickly through the hairy mounds to

the entrance of the laneway, panting as he reached the safety of a sidewall of the corner house. The adrenaline was pumping through his veins as he wiped the sweat away from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. He glanced out into the din and saw Bellatrix bearing down on the cart where the young woman was taking refuge.

Images of Gabrielle's horrified face suddenly filled his mind.

'No!' Came from under his breath as he darted out from behind the building and fired off a stunning spell in silence, hoping to catch Bellatrix off guard. But she knew exactly where he was, and had been waiting for him to strike. She deflected the spell, though appeared surprised at the force of it as she stumbled backwards a few steps. Harry was about to strike again when the girl suddenly appeared in his line of fire as she ran towards him.

'Get down!' he yelled angrily. The woman dived as Bellatrix fired off another curse. Harry ducked behind the corner of the house as the beam hit, tearing a gash in the orner of the brickwork. He stepped back out and aimed his wand, but Bellatrix was nowhere insight; she must have made it to the cart. He covered the blonde woman as she scrambled to her feet and ran passed Harry into the cover of the Laneway.

'You should have stayed in the pub!' he said aggressively over his shoulder at her.  
'I couldn't!' came her angry reply, but before she could say anything else, Harry grabbed her arm and raced down the darkened Alley.  
'C'mon!'

They hurtled down the Laneway as if the Devil himself were chasing them, weaving in and out of the hairy lumps in their path. Harry kept glancing over his shoulder, expecting Bellatrix to appear, shooting a deadly beam at them.

'You have to find cover.' He panted, and as they neared the end of the alley. Then Harry felt it. He thrust Julie in the opposite direction to him at the T-junction, diving behind a stone wall as a green beam of light flashed passed and contacted violently with a bird bath in a front garden, exploding it on impact.

'Run!' Harry yelled at the girl. She turned, bolting up the street in the opposite direction. He looked out from his stone cover just in time to see Bellatrix vanish from the laneway. He swore and jumped to his feet, running for the small street entrance some ways diagonally opposite.

*CRACK*

He turned, running backwards. Bellatrix appeared in the middle of the road at the end of the T-junction, behind the wall Harry had been crouched, expecting to have taken him by surprise. He aimed a stun at her silently, his heartbeat racing. She turned in time to see it and deflected it, though again it knocked her back a few paces as it rebounded off her shield. She looked infuriated as Harry lost sight of her behind the houses that lined the street he had entered.

'Harry!'

He swung round to see Neville coming in the opposite direction up the street.

'I told you not to come unless I gave the signal!' Harry said urgently as he raced towards him. He knew Bellatrix would be right behind him.

'C'mon!' he grabbed Neville's arm and pulled him with him.

'It's only me.' Neville panted as they headed for the road in front. 'The others ... are watching Hogwarts.' He panted.

'This way...' They had reached another T-junction, and veered off to the left. Harry pulled Neville with him as he made for the edge of town. He needed cover to face Bellatrix, and the forest that lined the back of Hogsmeade would give him that.

They tore down the street and Harry kept glancing over his shoulder, sure he would see Bella appear out of thin air any minute. They reached the end of the road and scanned the dully lit street. The buildings here were all in darkness, no comforting lights on in the windows and no movements behind the curtains; they stood deserted, whether from the immediate threat or past troubles. Not

too far off there was a struggle taking place, he could see the flashes of light in the sky above the houses down the street, he could hear the clashes of curses as they hit the buildings near the trees in the surrounding forest.

Harry looked to the Alley some way down the road.

'There!' he said as he guided Neville, pushing them to run towards it. The roads were now free of Quintaped carcasses so they ran flat out, pulling to a stop as they came upon the darkened Alley. Harry studied the shadows that led off into the trees beyond for a moment, and then suddenly a flash came soaring towards him. He pushed Neville with him as he dived behind the corner house and watched as the beam of light pelted into the building opposite, scattering debris onto the street.

'Stay here!' He threw at Neville, who was crouched in the shadows under a windowsill. If he could make it to the trees, he would have her! Jumping to his feet, he thrust himself beyond the safety of the house, lunging into the darkened alley.

He hugged the side of the buildings, trying to conceal himself in the shadows. A green beam of light shot towards him, sending him scrambling into a nearby doorway to avoid it. The curse smashed into the wooden door behind him, splintering the wood in all directions and showering Harry with debris. He waited for a moment then dodged back out, and worked his way along, darting from doorway to doorway, watching for another attack. Then another flash of light sped towards him, causing him to take cover behind a stone balustrade lining the stairs in front of him to avoid it.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his slightly trembling hand as he sat with his back against the stone, panting. He had been so determined in his effort to not let Bella get away, that he had allowed himself to become trapped. He was wondering wildly how he was going to get out of there while Bellatrix was fixed on him, when he heard a gurgling sound that made his stomach lurch.

He edged his shoulders up the stonework and turned to peer over the top. His eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat.

Bellatrix was standing on the path at the end of the road as a large hairy, spider-like Quintaped came creeping into the street from around the building. He threw his back against the stone again, swearing under his breath. Of course, there would be some who were outside the triangle!

'What's the matter Potter? Afraid of one little Quintaped?' Bellatrix laughed from a distance. 'After killing so many, this one shouldn't be any trouble for you!' Harry slowed his panting so that his breathing made less noise. His only hope was that it would pass him. He could slip out and run for the trees before it realized he was there.

He could hear the muffled thump of its clubbed feet, and a low rumbling noise gurgling from the back of its throat as it slowly inched its way towards him. Harry leaned down carefully and glanced around the edge of the stone, pulling swiftly back in and drawing his breath at the closeness of the monster. It was headed straight for him. His heartbeat raced as Bella continued to delight in his impending doom.

'If your interference means I must die at my Masters hand, then you will die too.' She said viciously. Harry's chest heaved as a hairy leg came into view only a couple of feet from where he was sitting. His panic rose as a second and then a third leg brought the body of the beast alongside him.

'You should not have crossed me, Potter!' She hissed.

Harry sat as still as he could, yet he knew the beast had not needed to see him, it had smelt him. As he turned his head it barred its teeth at him, its giant yellow eyes glittering dangerously, hungrily.

'He wants you for himself, but I will have my revenge!' she ranted.

Harry started edging back on his hands and feet towards the doorway. He paused fleetingly as he lifted his wand and fired a stunning spell, but as before, it had little effect. The monster only seemed infuriated by the sting it must have felt from it, and lunged at Harry, just missing his foot as he scrambled to his feet and backed himself against the doorway, pushing at it furiously. Bellatrix's laughter rang out.

'Say goodbye, *Harry Potter*.'

The sweat from his body was making his clothing cling to him in the chilly night air as he watched the creature bring its body towards him. He fired off two more curses that both battered into the beast, but had little effect except to anger it further. It was no more than four feet away when it's jagged teeth bared menacingly and it opened its mouth to lunge at him again.

Instinctively, Harry produced a shield charm as its putrid breath inundated his nostrils, causing the beast to stumble backwards a few feet as it was repelled. Harry pushed out of the doorway, and leapt over the balustrade, hurtling himself at full speed towards the trees. As he ran, he registered vaguely a figure making its way towards Bellatrix along one of the shadowed paths, and as it sank through his thoughts, he stopped just short of his cover, whispering under his breath.

'*Neville!*'

'And what have we here?' Bellatrix's mocking laughter that had followed Harry as he ran, turned into a wicked simper at the sight of Neville. Popping noises rang out as half a dozen black-cloaked figures appeared, partially obscuring Bellatrix from Harry's view.

'It's time to go!' one of them said 'It's over Bellatrix! We have to get out of here.'

'No!' she bit out, 'I'm not finished yet.'

'Don't do it, Bellatrix!' Harry said loudly, keeping his wand trained on the new arrivals. Neville stood in the middle of the pathway that lay between the houses and the forest, pointing his wand at her. The Death Eaters turned at his voice, wands drawn. A beam of light shot out, as a curse was fired from one of them, but his wand was thrust skyward by another's angry hand, sending the curse careering harmlessly into a nearby tree.

'It's Potter!'

Harry wiped at his face with his shoulder, impatiently trying to remove the sweat that stung his eyes. *What is wrong with me?* His mind felt like it was beginning to fog over as he gripped his wand in both hands.

'Neville, get out of here.' He said in a low warning.

'She's going to pay, Harry. She's going to pay for what she did to my mum and dad.' He answered.

Harry could see that his wand was shaking slightly as he swallowed nervously. It was obvious Bellatrix recognized him as she grinned maliciously.

'Another one who wants to go the same way as his parents! You want to feel their pain, don't you?' she taunted Neville cruelly.

'NO!' Harry said aggressively as he started to move slowly towards Neville. 'It's me you want!'

'Oh, now don't hog all the attention, let the boy have his moment.' she said as laughter trickled from her cruel mouth, her wand directed on her challenger. Harry saw the Quintaped out of the corner of his eye, in the shadows of the buildings behind Neville. It was slowly making its way towards them.

'He's been waiting his whole pathetic life for this,' she glanced at Harry dangerously 'and I would stop moving if I were you. I could just kill him right now.' Harry stopped with Neville still a good fifteen feet away. Neville shot out a curse suddenly, but it was flicked aside by her carelessly.

'Crucio!'

Neville's shield proved useless. His face contorted and his body curled. And as he screamed in agony, he dropped to the ground, his wand rolling away from his hand.

'It's me you want Bellatrix. Leave him alone.' Harry felt sick with Neville's pain, wincing as the screams inundated his ears. He started firing curse after curse at Bellatrix as she walked towards Neville's writhing body, but the Death Eaters stood between Harry and his target, taking all of their



effort to keep up with him, though they did not retaliate at first. They appeared in particular to be struggling with the force of the stun he was casting at them, stumbling backwards in their attempts to block it and swearing angrily.

The screaming echoed through the forest behind Harry.

'STOP IT!' Harry took off towards Neville again, but the cloaked figures moved forward to block him. One of them hissed at Bellatrix.

'We don't have time for your games.'

She giggled evilly as Neville's screams became hoarse from the pain. Harry knew what Neville was feeling; he too had felt it before.

'STOP IT!' He roared.

Finally the cries stopped. Bellatrix glanced between her cohorts at Harry with a triumphant grin on her face as Neville grasped his wand and picked himself up off the ground, groggily stumbling to his feet.

'Don't move!' Harry yelled to Neville, he could see the Quintaped was lurking in the nearby shadows. But Neville stretched himself to his full height, and ignoring Harry, aimed his wand at her once more.

'No,' barely escaped Harry's lips at Neville's determination.

'Are they breeding you utterly stupid these days, boy?' she asked him mockingly. Neville was staring down his wand at her. She flicked aside a curse he sent her way and it rebounded into the house beside her, at the end of the street. A loud crack rang out as it sent broken bricks onto the pathway, but Neville fired again, this time missing Bella as she dodged her shoulder out of its path.

'You are wasting time! We have to get out of here.'

'You're right,' Bellatrix said darkly in answer to her robed companion. 'I am wasting time'. Harry knew what she was going to do before she did it. He knew she was going to revel in Neville's pain.

'Don't do it!' Harry's furious command had come too late. She had deflected another curse Neville sent her way with almost no effort, and hit him with the Cruciatus curse again.

Neville hit the ground as before; writhing in agony, and screaming uncontrollably. Harry swayed as he fought back the bile in his throat, firing uselessly at her again. 'STOP IT!'

She closed in on Neville and kicked his wand away, and then stepped back again, watching on in silent pleasure, her mouth curling into a twisted grin. The Quintaped had paused and appeared to be watching the unusual actions of its intended prey as it writhed in unimaginable pain. Harry vaguely registered another figure moving swiftly through the shadows of the street, heading towards them, but Neville's screams were filling his head, which was already becoming increasingly woozy, making him feel sick again.

His body was shaking as the chilly night air pierced his damp clothing. He lifted his shaky shoulder in agitation, wiping the relentless sweat away from his forehead. He couldn't think straight with the noise and his mind searched desperately for a way to put an end to this. He opened his mouth before he could think what he was saying.

'IF YOU STOP IT, I'LL GO WITH YOU!'

'What?' Neville's screams finally died, as Bellatrix turned on Harry.

'Leave him alone.' Harry said more quietly this time. 'I'll go willingly to Voldemort if you let him go.' His wand arm trembled as he stared over it at Bellatrix. His eyelids were starting to droop heavily and he felt the ground swirling beneath him.

'You expect me to believe you'll come to your death if I let this useless idiot go?'

'I give you my word.'

'No...' Neville croaked as he staggered to his feet.

One of the Death Eaters spoke up.

'Lets take him and get out! The others will be here soon.' he hissed. Harry watched her as she looked at him through narrowed eyes.

'Our little boy hero wants to lay down his own-?' but Bellatrix was cut off by a flash of white light and was knocked to the ground. Neville threw himself on top of her as another flash of light coming from the shadows behind the Quintaped, which had started to move in on them again, pelted into one of the Death Eaters who had their backs to the street.

Harry started firing on them in their confusion, and he hit one immediately with a stun, sending the masked figure careering backwards with such force that he took two of his companions with him as he hurtled to the ground. Then from the shadows of the street, two more curses came flying into the fray. One was deflected, but the other contacted its target, flinging him to the ground.

Harry kept attacking, and so did the person in the street, keeping the remaining four cloaked figures too busy to interfere with Neville and Bellatrix, who were still struggling on the ground. But, with three of them now returning his fire, Harry was unable to keep his shield up long enough and took a hit from two of them at once. The white-hot beams thrust him off his feet and sent him crashing backwards. There was a sickening crunch in his rib cage as it collided with a tree trunk, and pain ripped through him as he slumped to the ground.

'Watch it, you idiot!'

Harry heard the dreamlike echo of one of his assailants muffled voices as he lifted himself slowly off the ground. Pain forked out across his rib cage, and he shook his head as he staggered to his feet, trying to clear the fog that threatened to overtake him. He clutched at his side with one arm, and reached up and wiped the sweat from his eyes with his wand still clutched in his hand. He stared out on the scene before him, dazed and shaking.

Three of the six Death Eaters were down, and two were firing up the streets in search of who ever lay hidden. One was watching Harry nervously, taking in his battered condition, but did not move to attack him.

'Neville!' Harry tried to yell it, but it was impossible to get enough air into his lungs. The Quintaped was creeping up behind the unsuspecting Neville, who was busy struggling to keep Bellatrix from wriggling like a wildcat underneath him as she clawed for her wand, which lay just out of reach. All three Death Eaters now faced Harry as he glanced up the street, battling to keep upright. He caught site of a blonde head poking out of a doorway. Julie!

'*LOOK OUT!*' She yelled in warning, watching the Quintaped approach on the two struggling figure. As soon as her voice rang out, the three-cloaked figures span around.

Harry took his opportunity and raised his wand with an unsteady arm firing a stun at one of them. It pelted into the masked figure, making him groan before falling to the ground. The Quintaped appeared ready to strike, its controller no longer a threat as she lay beneath Neville, and it eyed its intended meal greedily. In desperation, Harry sucked in the pain and yelled out to Neville, and turned all of his curses towards the Quintaped, as Julie fired on the masked menaces.

The curses that hit the Quintaped's hairy hide, only made it flinch, as if bitten by an annoying insect. Bellatrix had stopped struggling. She had spotted the Quintaped, and was waiting for it to strike Neville, who had Bellatrix's wand in hand. He finally turned to see what Harry was yelling about, his eyes widening as the beast's mouth boar down on him. Neville moved quickly, rolling off Bellatrix and across the ground, looking back just in time to see the ghastly mouth close over her.

'*NOOOOO!*' her blood-curdling scream rang out as the teeth sunk into her sides and lifted her from the ground.

The two Death Eaters that were left were backing away uncertainly, firing at the creature. The monster bit down on its screeching Quarry, and the sound of bone crunching could be heard as its prey spluttered, then fell silent. Blood ran down the yellowish fangs and dripped onto its fur as it turned and headed for the trees, Bellatrix's limp body hanging from its jaws.

With two loud cracking sounds, the Death Eaters were gone.

Some way off, Julie spoke to Neville as she approached him, but Harry could no longer see them clearly. Their voices seemed to drift into nothing as he hung his head in his hands in an effort to keep the darkness at bay. Wiping at the sweat in his eyes, he tried to keep focused on the ground at his feet when a muffled cry made him look up. Neville's still form seemed to glow an eerie green colour for a second, and then he crumpled to the ground.

Harry joined Julie, automatically firing a stun at the Death Eater who was trying to get up from the ground. As the curses hit, his head dropped back and his body skidded along the gravel from the force.

*Neville!* Suddenly, nothing felt real. Blackness was edging in on his world, but he knew he had to stay awake. He knew he had to see the motionless figure laying on the path for himself. Then he would see he wasn't dead.

Clutching at his side, he walked unsteadily up to the blonde girl who was crouched over Neville. Her shoulders were shaking as she wept into the palms of her hands. The vision of Neville's body shifted before Harry's eyes, doubling and swirling sickeningly. He turned from it, unable to look at it anymore. He knew where he had to go. He knew someone who could make sense of this, set him right. He limped off up the street, out of the darkness and into the light.

The buildings lurched ominously and Harry was having trouble keeping his feet, but he stumbled on. He was finding it increasingly difficult to walk the road, which for some reason appeared to be becoming lumpy and hairy. He fell a couple of times, and though the pain took his breath away, the dazed feeling in his head helped to numb the real pain.

As he rounded a bend he couldn't remember ever having been down before, he saw a sign that no longer looked familiar. He couldn't remember where he was going, or why, by the time he staggered barely conscious towards the darkened doorway.

He eased his body weight against it painfully. The heavy door opened and Harry stumbled forward, leaning himself against a wall as the door closed behind him. He breathed in stabbing pain, dropping his head back and closing his eyes to the blur. Exhaustion swept over him as his legs began to give way, his body slowly sliding down the wall behind him.

He vaguely heard the door re-open, followed by urgent footsteps. Harry felt a strong hand grip his arm and heave him to a standing position.

'Thought you'd come here.' A gruff voice said as Harry's left arm was thrown over someone's shoulder. 'C'mon, let's get you up to a room before anyone sees ya.'

## 16. Julie

Blurry images faded in and out as Harry struggled with the shadows that engulfed him. Whenever it seemed he might break free, the pain that tore through his limbs would eclipse the light, pushing him back into his dark isolation. Sometimes his body burned, and he would feel like he was standing in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place, opening the locket all over again.

And then there were times when he felt cold, the kind of cold that is born from within the depths of your very soul. Every now and then, determined voices would seek him out, beckoning him from the darkness. He would feel himself being lifted, only to splutter and choke on liquids that were being forced into his mouth. The blackness seemed endless, his struggle, hopeless.

Then finally, he began to break free.

He could feel the shadows gradually lifting and the darkness ebbing away as he slowly came to. He opened his eyes to the dim orange light that flickered across the canopy above him. His body ached as he lifted a shaky hand to his head, and ran his fingers through his hair. Even though he was awake, his mind felt numb, like he was still asleep. He turned his head, spying the bedside cabinet

and groggily lifted himself onto his elbow, reaching for his glasses. They clattered against the wood as his trembling hand fell on them. Pushing them onto his face, Harry looked out on a room he had never seen before.

He was lying in a four-poster, canopied bed. The cream floral sheets and quilt were old and worn, perhaps once they were white, but yellowed with age, yet they were clean. The dark grained wooden furniture that littered the room showed years of wear by its many scratches, and the wooden flooring had a large, threadbare rug in the centre upon which an old matching floral arm chair and lounge stood. They were positioned around the fireplace, whose small flames cast the only light with which to see by. Someone was lying on the couch; blonde hair was poking out of the end of a salmon coloured woollen blanket.

Blonde hair.

Harry looked down at the floor thoughtfully. Blonde hair. He felt like that should mean something to him. His head began to hurt as he tried to make the connection in his mind. He closed his eyes as the room started to swim. There was a huge emptiness inside of him, physically and mentally. It was like he was missing something. Something important. The door creaked open.

'Just closed shop, thought I'd come and have a look at ya.'

'Sir?' Harry croaked, confused. He had no idea where he was, but the last person he expected to see was his Defence teacher. Abe breathed out heavily as he crossed the room. He picked up a glass decanter that was resting on the mantle piece above the fire.

'You'd be wanting a drink, I expect.' Sir's gruff voice was comforting somehow and Harry slowly raised himself into an upright position, though his vision shifted unnaturally as he did so, causing everything to drift into two. He closed his eyes again to clear the sickening images from view. 'Just take it slow now,' Sir said as he poured some of the contents of the jug into a cup. 'Here.' He said, and he thrust the cup towards Harry.

Harry took it with a shaky hand and put the full cup to his lips, gulping the contents deeply, trying to quench the parched feeling in his mouth. As he pulled the cup away, he felt an incredible heat down the back of his throat, enough to make his eyes sting. He gasped as Sir took the empty cup and refilled it.

'That'll put a few hairs on your chest' he said, 'and a few other places you wouldn't want it ... if you drink enough of it.' He added as he handed Harry the cup again. The warmth was spreading pleasantly from his throat to his stomach, filling some of the emptiness he felt, so Harry threw the second cup down the back of his throat, making his eyes water even more.

'He shouldn't be drinking that, Aberforth. He's not well enough.' The blonde girl had woken and was sitting upright, glaring disapprovingly at the two of them. Sir rolled his eyes at Harry as he refilled his cup to the brim again.

'Wont do him any harm.' And over his shoulder, he added 'Firewhiskey's one of the oldest medicines around.' He shook his head at Harry. 'Healers. There all the same.' Harry drank the firewhiskey down, welcoming the sensation of heat.

'When it comes to some things, yes.' She stood up and came over to the bed. Harry watched her as she took the jug from Sir, and grabbing the empty cup from Harry's hand, she placed them both on the cabinet. She was a young woman in her early twenties, not unpleasant to look at, with pale skin and shoulder length blonde hair, a few freckles across her nose and unnaturally deep brown eyes that had a soulful stare. He thought her features looked familiar somehow, he was almost certain he'd seen her somewhere before.

'You don't remember anything, do you?' she said quietly, eyeing him with those impossibly deep eyes.

'That depends,' Harry said, beginning to feel the effects of the Firewhiskey.

'On what?' Sir asked.

'On what I'm supposed to have forgotten.' Harry said with an intoxicated grin.

The warmth of the Firewhiskey was seeping through Harry rapidly, making the cold emptiness within him retreat. His body didn't seem to be trembling as severely and his head was no longer feeling heavy, in fact, it felt rather light.

The woman sighed 'You've never had Firewhiskey before, have you?'

'Nope.'

'Honestly Aberforth, you cant just go ploughing him with drink. I bet the strongest thing he's ever had is butterbeer.'

'So what if it is?' Harry said, getting a little irritated at her inference that he was a kid.

'I didn't mean it like that.' She aimed at him, then turning to Sir, she added 'He has to remember. The longer we put it off, the harder it'll be.' She seemed way too serious to Harry.

'C'mon Julie. It's better like this, something to soften the blow.'

'What blow?' An uneasy feeling was creeping over Harry as he watched them drowsily. They both turned and looked at him. Julie breathed in heavily and sat herself down on the bed. Sir grabbed the old wooden chair against the wall and pulled it before him, straddling the back of it.

'Two nights ago, you used a spell' Aberforth said gravely 'a dangerous spell ... ancient magic that is rarely seen in this day and age. It saved a lot of people from a horrible death, but it wasn't without its side effects.' Harry's eyes dropped to the floor searchingly, which was swaying gently. Like Julie, it seemed familiar, but he couldn't see it in his mind, he couldn't remember it.

'You would have been alright, you would have felt drained like your companions, but you would have slept it off harmlessly. But you were already ill when you performed the spell,' Julie said quietly 'you just didn't know it yet. The power that you called upon used a lot of your own energy, and considering the condition you were in, it took rather a heavy toll on you.' Harry was frowning at her, though he could still feel a stupid grin on his lips. 'We need to help you remember the whole night, before bits of your memory start accosting you in your effort to piece it together. I can use legilimency to help put you in touch with the memory you're suppressing. Connect the dots, so to speak.'

'Suppressing?' Harry slurred slightly.

'If I can succeed in bringing the whole memory out in one go, then you'll be able to make sense of it, and face it. These sort of memories have a way of coming back in mangled pieces until you're tortured with an incomplete, and twisted knowledge of what happened.' Even through the haze of the Firewhiskey Harry swallowed uncomfortably. 'Trust me, its far worse leaving it to come slowly, than bringing it to the surface all at once, quickly.' She paused and went on nervously. 'There is the risk that I wont be able to bring it all out on my first try. It could be too difficult. That being the case, its always much harder to get in again a second time because ...' she frowned and added uncertainly 'because you'll be, well ... you'll-'

'Just do it.' Harry said dully, a sinking feeling had been growing in him along with the muzziness of intoxication. Something bad had happened, something he had to remember.

'But, you should know, if I can't get to the whole mem-'

'It doesn't matter. If it's worse to wait, then it's better to try, right?' he said with his eyelids drooping. He knew there was something missing, and he felt a great need to fill in the emptiness inside of him. He did not want to put off finding out the truth. He had to know what had brought him here. He needed to know, and maybe the Firewhiskey had helped him want to face it. She watched him in silence for a moment, and then she asked him to sit on the side of the bed.

He pulled the sheets back, barely registering he was still in his jeans and a t-shirt, rather than pyjamas, and swung his feet on the floor, his head swimming in warning as it seemed to trail behind his movements and his body trembling again. He closed his eyes and hung his head, running a hand through his hair in an effort to gather himself. Abe and Julie both stood, Abe offering his chair up to her as he turned it round the right way. She sat down and met Harry's gaze as he lifted his head.

'Ready?'

He nodded, and then a thought occurred to him.

'You wont be able to see anything else in there will you?' he asked 'I mean, you're going straight for the most recent memory, right?'

'Don't worry,' her mouth curved almost into a smile 'I won't be fishing around.' He breathed out and nodded slightly, rubbing his sweaty palms on his jeans.

Abe stood behind her as Harry met her eyes. She had her wand in hand, and under the determined gaze of her immensely deep eyes, he felt uncomfortably like she could see right through him, passed his veneer, and deep into his very heart and soul.

Then it started.

It came slowly at first, starting with the memory of his last lesson with Sir. Moving through the trees, the dappled light shining through the leaves, then was standing in the Great Hall, talking to Ron and Hermione. Next, the trio were in Hogsmeade, drawing unusual symbols on the ground.

Harry's heartbeat was quickening as the images gradually sped up. Each image Julie uncovered was being swamped with the accompanying memories. The monsters were coming and power surged through his body, light arcing across the sky as the Quintapedes writhed.

Harry flinched. The sweat was beginning to form on his brow again as the images came more rapidly. He was running through Hogsmeade, looking for cover, Julie at his side, then she was gone and Neville was in her place. They took cover and he instructed Neville to stay put.

Harry's breathing was becoming ragged now as the images flashed faster across his mind. He was running for the trees, but Neville was there. Next Neville was writhing on the ground in agony, and then Bellatrix was on the ground beneath him as the Quintapede neared.

'No' Harry breathed aloud. His stomach lurching painfully as the images bombarded him. This was all coming too fast. Something awful was about to happen, something he no longer wanted to see.

Neville rolled away and the Quintapede crunched down on Bellatrix ... Two cloaked figures vanished ... Julie and Neville greeted each other knowingly. The images swirled. It was coming too fast. He wasn't ready for it.

'NO!' he said urgently.

But before he could break the link, he saw it. A green flash of light, and Neville dropping helplessly to the ground.

He panted as he threw Julie out of his mind.

His whole body ached with the weight of it, and he felt like he was going to be sick. He looked up at her tear stained eyes. She had lived it all again through him. He hung his head in his hands, lost in his grief.

'It worked then?' Sir's gruff voice interrupted.

'Yes.' Julie said in a strained voice. There was silence for a moment as Harry stared at the floor, trying to slow his rapid breathing.

'I'll leave you to it.' Harry heard Sir's heavy footsteps clod across the floor, and then the creak of the door as it opened and closed again behind him.

'I'm sorry.' Julie said miserably. 'I knew him too, but not like you.' Harry looked up at her. 'His grandmother was a good friend of my mother's...' she trailed off when she saw the look on Harry's face. He stood up, swaying gently, and without speaking, went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He grabbed a towel from the cabinet, stripped, and ran an overly hot shower before stepping into the scolding waterfall.

Harry's desolate tears mixed with the hot flow of water. He leaned his hands against the tiled wall, supporting himself under the punishing water as steam filled the room. His body still shook from fever, and the effort of showering, along with the grief of Neville's loss, exhausted him. By the time he emerged from the bathroom, his skin raw from the scolding heat, his legs barely carried him out of the bathroom and across the room to his bed.

Julie was back on the couch. She lay motionless as if asleep, but he doubted her mind was at peace

enough for that. There was a note on a small piece of parchment next to the bed, instructing him to drink the contents of the cup beside it, and go back to bed. And though Harry loathed the thoughts of sleep and dreams, his body wouldn't do otherwise. He drank the potion down and slid under the sheets, fingering his scar, until he drifted into a restless sleep.

His dreams were full of hatred and heartbreak, as he relived the one event he would do anything to forget. He had grieved as he stumbled his way to the Hog's Head that night, before he had faded and lost his memory of it. He had felt like someone had reached in and ripped his insides out, and now ... now that grief was slowly changing, gradually being replaced.

The night played over and over in a never-ending nightmare as anger and sadness coursed through him. He felt frustration because of his weakened state when it happened, knowing he should have prevented it. He was angry with Neville for coming to town, when he had told him to stay at Hogwarts. Feelings of regret swelled in him because he hadn't made Neville leave the minute he'd run into him, and a terrible fury flooded him at the Death Eater whose name he didn't yet know, who was responsible for killing the one person in this world that least deserved to die. The injustice of it swamped him, as he burned with fury in shadow.

He felt a cool damp cloth being pressed against his forehead, and opened his eyes. Julie was watching him as she mopped his brow; her eyes kind and sympathetic.

'It'll be okay.' her whispering voice said as she brought her lips down, brushing the skin she had cleared of dampness. His mind felt numb, as if he were still dreaming. He was searching for an escape, for something to embrace that would put an end to his pain. Reaching out, he grabbed her arm as she lifted it away to leave, unwilling to let his only source of comfort go. She eyed him almost pityingly, which angered him.

She thinks I'm a kid ... She feels sorry for me! He could feel the anger wash through him, and driven by a need even he hadn't acknowledged, or maybe because he was still under the effects of the whiskey, he lifted himself to her abruptly and kissed her.

Her lips were unyielding to his determination at first, but then they parted to momentarily caress him before they faded. He collapsed back on the bed, throwing an arm over his forehead in frustration, his eyes looking out of the window, looking anywhere but at her. He felt her rise off the bed and held back the pain and anger that stewed below the surface. He had wanted the touch of another; he had craved a distraction from the image of Neville shrouded in a deathly green light.

The bed dipped and Harry turned to see Julie slipping between the sheets beside him. She had taken her jeans and shirt off, and was wearing only her white bra and briefs. He lay watching her, as she positioned herself on top of him.

Harry reached out to her in his time of need, and placed his hands on her thighs, slowly running them up to her hips. He found the feel of her soft skin extremely soothing, and as she brought her mouth down to his, he closed his eyes, pushing his haunting thoughts as deep as possible.

Her lips were warm and tender, and their touch eased him in his moment of grief. A longing he had been harbouring for what seemed like forever, awoke in him again, yet this time, he was not overcome with the need to douse the inner flames that erupted in him. They kissed without heavy emotion, like all the troubles of the world had disintegrated, and Harry revelled in the uncomplicated comfort.

She pulled away from him and slid her hands behind her back, unclipping her bra and dropping it thoughtlessly to the floor. Harry pulled his t-shirt over his head and lay back, taking in her femininity in the orange firelight, which gave her skin a healthy peach glow. She pressed her body against his, and as their lips met, Harry rolled her onto her back.

He dragged his lips lightly along the line of her neck, and made his way to her throat, the pain within him fading behind his want. His hand ventured up her inner thigh, and as it lingered, she arched her back, her breathing becoming more rapid. Harry lost himself in the pleasures he had been denying himself too long, and because the act was one of need, not love, there were no fears of repercussions. It was safe.

He kissed his way down her bare skin, and as his lips closed over her breast, a small gasp escaped her open mouth. His breathing was becoming ragged, her pleasure increasing his own excitement. He lifted himself to seek out her lips once more. She kissed him with an urgency that he returned, and as she reached down and undid his jeans, his tongue met hers, his own ache growing with the soft want that escaped her lips. He pulled away from her reluctantly to throw his jeans off, and then settled on top of her with his full weight as he kissed her deeply.

Her hands wandered feely over his back, making his skin come alive beneath her touch, and he started to feel a great need to complete what they had started. His hand found her underwear, and eased them down her thighs, and dragging his lips away from her neck, he pulled them off around her feet.

He came down on her intimately, carefully, seeking solace and an end to his aching want, and as they shared in their final moments together, Harry pushed all of his anguish deep inside, freeing himself to burden her with his pain, and finally finding the release that would help him face tomorrow.

~\*~\*~\*~

During the night, Harry and Julie had lain in the dark and talked, both unwilling to sleep. It hadn't taken Harry long to realize that he liked Julie a lot. She was kind and generous, and very free spirited and independent, if not a little haphazard in her approach to life.

She had examined his rib cage, and aside from some residual bruising, it felt like new, though his fever lingered, and she informed him it would for another day or two, telling him if he expected to recover fully, he would have to eat properly and get more rest. She said his body was worn out, and would crash and burn again if he didn't start doing the right thing. Eventually Harry drifted into sleep, more at peace with himself now he'd had something to take his mind off Neville.

He woke later on that morning and dressed, leaving Julie still curled asleep under the covers. He headed down the stairs; his body still sweating, and feeling weak and sore. Julie had said Ron and Hermione would have slept the effects of the spell off, but the damage it had wreaked on Harry made him anxious to see for himself if they were okay. He felt responsible for getting them involved in it in the first place, and his guilt would only be quelled at the sight of them looking normal and healthy. Neville's death was the latest in a string of burdens he'd had to shoulder. He felt anymore would be too much. Anymore, and he would finally sink with the weight of it.

Harry threw the invisibility cloak over himself as he looked around the grimy, empty bar. Sir was nowhere in sight, so he made his way across the room and unlocked the door, stepping out into the brightness of the aftermath of an early snowfall. He pulled his thin jacket about him and set off through the foot deep snow towards Hogwarts, his mind lingering on Julie's sleeping form.

She had gotten to know Aberforth rather well while dating what she called, "a vile sack of festering pus", who had regularly dragged her along to the Hog's Head, ordering her to sit at the bar and wait for him while he met with numerous shady characters. She spent the time chatting to the barman, and one night about a year ago, Aberforth had spotted her natural talents for healing, when a particularly nasty incident involving her boyfriend, broke out on the street outside. She hadn't gone into details, but the event had disturbed her enough to finally leave him after two years of misery.

Harry had barely reached the edge of town before his body began to tremble again, whether from the fever, or the coldness of the biting breeze on his sweaty clothing. As he trudged through the gates of Hogsmeade, the road at his feet started to drift gently to and fro before his eyes, making the empty pangs in his stomach turn to nausea. He hadn't reached the halfway point, when his limbs began to ache, the extra effort required to lift his feet through the snow, exhausting him. He wished now he had slept last night, his thoughts turning back to his conversation with Julie.

Aberforth had prodded her into setting up her own premises in Hogsmeade, called "JAFZ" or "Julies Ache-Free Zone", which she also resided above in a small flat. She would never be qualified to work in St Mungos, unable to further her studies in healing having barely scraped through her owls at



Hogwarts before leaving in her 5th year, but she hated hospitals anyway, so she really didn't mind. Sometimes she worked for little or no money, when ill people came to her with empty pockets, but she made enough to get by, and had even recently employed her friend Pen part time to help with the bookkeeping.

By the time he reached the huge iron gates of Hogwarts, Harry found it hard to focus on them. They seemed to loom over him, drifting dangerously. When they were closed behind him again, he continued on across the grounds, stopping just outside the double oak doors to remove his cloak and lean against the wall for support to gather his strength. Once the world stopped swirling sickeningly, he pulled himself off the wall and walked into the entrance hall, heading up the marble stairs.

As much as he yearned to see Ron and Hermione, he dreaded each and every step he took; the guilt over what had happened, and the knowledge of what waited for him in the common room, hung over him like a shadow in the empty hallways.

He could feel the Fat Lady watching him as he made his way slowly towards her, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet. The long trip from Hogsmeade, had left him feeling feverish and worn out, so he wiped the sweat from his brow on the back of a shaky sleeve, before saying the password without looking at her.

The Fat Lady had grown rather fond of Neville over the past few years, having had frequent incidents with him over forgotten passwords, and her silence as he stood there, waiting for her to swing open, confirmed his worst fears. She blamed him, just like everyone else would. The painting finally opened to reveal the entrance, and as Harry eased himself through it, he heard a muffled sniff from her canvass.

His stomach dropped painfully.

He swayed as he walked into the common room. The low talk that had wafted through the room as he entered, died to complete silence. He stood there for a moment, wishing the ground would swallow him up, but there was no escaping what had happened.

His eyes fell on the only people in the room who were moving as he waited. Harry was swamped in bushy brown hair as Hermione threw herself at him. He had thought he would want his friends to rush to embrace him, but now that Hermione had him in a tight squeeze, he found he couldn't hug her back. Harry's arms hung loosely at his sides as she pulled away, her eyes swollen and watery.

'Are you and Ron okay?' he asked through shaky breaths as he fought to keep focused.  
'We're fine, which is more than I can say for you.' Ron was frowning deeply at Harry.  
'What about Lupin ... Tonks ... the others?' he asked.  
'They all made it.' Ron said solemnly.

'Harry, where have you been? McGonagall told us what happened ... she said you were with someone who was looking after you, but...' she trailed off shaking her head, taking in his appearance and wiping at her damp cheeks with her hand.

Aware that all eyes in the room were on them, he said 'I'll tell you about it -' stopping abruptly as he saw Ginny emerging from the girl's dormitory. He felt the sweat beading on his face as he dropped his gaze to the floor.

She walked silently to him and lifted a hand to his forehead. 'Your ill, you shouldn't have come back alone.'

'We should take you to Madame Pomphrey!' Hermione said quickly.

'No!' Harry said abruptly. He didn't want to spend the night in the hospital ward, and he didn't like them fussing over him suddenly. It felt wrong that they should be so easy on him.

'Upstairs' Ginny quietly, and firmly took him by the hand, directing him up to the boy's dorms. Harry went; glad to be out of the watchful gaze of the other students. When they reached the Gryffindor seventh year's dorm, Ginny went over to the window and closed it against the strong chill. When she turned, Harry was staring at Neville's bed, transfixed by the loneliness of it.

Neville's belongings had already been removed. Nothing remained. Except the knowledge that as far as Harry was concerned, this was Neville's space. As much as he didn't want to think about it, he couldn't stop himself. Neville was one of the things about Hogwarts that had made it home. Neville had always had faith in Harry. He had always trusted him. Guilty tears prickled at his eyes.

A soft touch on his arm made him turn. Ginny quietly spilled warm tears down her cheeks as she looked at him, but now that he thought about his encounter with Julie, he could no longer look her in the eye. She took a step closer and held him, but it did not comfort him, instead it doubled his guilt. He knew he would have to tell her, he knew he wouldn't be at peace until he did. And then it would change everything. He knew. This would be the thing that would drive her to let go. But he could not do it yet, not while her grief was so raw.

She pulled away; surprised that he did not return her embrace. A flicker of doubt registered in her eyes, but she turned from him and pulled his bed sheets back.

'Hermione's gone to tell McGonagall you're back.' Ron said heavily as he entered the room. 'Get in to bed.' Ginny said as she stripped him of his jacket. 'I'll bring you up something to eat.' Ron cleared his throat as he hovered awkwardly by the cast iron fireplace.

'What about class?' Harry asked as he sunk between the sheets.  
'Saturday, mate. No class till Monday.' Ron frowned in obvious concern.

'Don't you remember what day it is?' Ginny started to wipe his forehead with a hand towel she had dipped into the water jug, but Harry grabbed her arm.

'Don't' he said without looking at her. 'I can do it.' Taking the cloth from her and pressing it to his forehead, he laid back and put his head on the pillow, closing his eyes. He didn't want her to touch him. He didn't want her pity. He didn't deserve it. He could sense she and Ron were exchanging glances in the silence that followed, but it wasn't until she left the room, that Ron spoke.

'Where've you been?'  
'The Hog's Head.' Harry said, opening his eyes again to stare at the canopy above him.  
'Why there?'  
'It's where I ended up,' he placed the cloth on the bedside table 'after...' Ron didn't wait for more.  
'So you were with Sir?' he said sceptically.  
'Yeah, except he's not just "Sir" anymore.' He turned his head to look at Ron 'His names Aberforth. Aberforth Dumbledore. Professor Dumbledore was his brother.'

Ron screwed his face up. 'What ... him?'  
'I know now why he looked familiar to me the first time I saw him years ago at the pub. I'd already seen a photo of him. Moody showed it to me at Sirius's place.' Harry stared at the ceiling again. 'He was a bit younger then, not so hairy as now, but it's definitely him.'  
'How come he never said?'  
'No idea,' Harry had wondered the same thing. There was silence for a moment.

'You alright?' Ron asked. Harry closed his eyes again. He didn't want to go over everything that had happened. He would tell Ron and Hermione soon, just not right now. 'It's just ... you're ...' Harry looked at him as Ron lifted a finger hesitantly to his forehead, pointing at it 'you're playing with your scar.'

Harry hadn't even noticed that he was running his finger back and forth over it. He pulled his hand away quickly. 'It's fine, it doesn't hurt.' He tried to sound normal, but didn't quite manage it. He had told the truth, his scar wasn't hurting, but it itched with a strange feeling of pins and needles.

Hermione came in a short time later with a tray of porridge and toast, plonking it down on his bed as he sat up.

'We should have made you eat more.' She said gravely, 'I knew you were falling ill. I should've made you eat.' He didn't feel a bit like eating right at that moment, but listening to Hermione made him feel incredibly guilty, and he knew if he wanted to get well he was going to have eat more, so he worked his way through the porridge while Ron and Hermione told him what happened to them in Hogsmeade.

After the Death Eaters attacked, they ran for cover in a nearby alley, and found themselves being pursued by two of the black-cloaked figures. They ran from street to street, dodging curses, occasionally flinging one off of their own, but a terrible tiredness was creeping up on them. Hermione said it was as if they'd drunk a sleeping potion, and then were stupidly trying to run off the effects.

Eventually they were slouched against a vacant house, battling to keep their feet when the persistent Death Eaters, who turned out to be Amycus and Avery, (names Harry recognized immediately) closed in on them. Ron and Hermione tried to claw their way out of their stupor, but there was no fighting it, and laughing at the state they were in, huddled in a doorway almost passed out, Amycus and Avery raised their wands.

Ron said a curse that seemed to come from nowhere, knocked Avery off his feet, and when Amycus turned in search of the caster, he was hit by a red flash and knocked unconscious too. That was the last thing either of them remember. They woke up in the hospital wing the next day.

'Must have been Lupin.' Harry said. He had finished his porridge, and was lying back on the pillow again. He closed his eyes as his own tiredness began to get the better of him. 'Get some rest,' Hermione said. 'We'll be back to check on you later.' Harry only vaguely heard her as the warmth in his stomach from the much needed intake of food spread pleasantly through him, and slowly lulled him to sleep.

'Harry...' a soft echoing voice called to him from afar. He was floating. Or was he drowning? He was suspended in a sea of inky blackness, drifting with the current. Up ahead of him he could see a light. He was slowly making his way towards the murky red glow. 'Harry...' there it was again. He pulled his body round to look over his shoulder. But there was nothing but blackness behind him. 'Harry!' the voice echoed louder and he knew its sweet sound. He turned from the red glow, and then someone was shaking him. Opening his eyes, he looked into Ginny's worried face.

'I've brought you something to eat.' Her brow creased, as she stared at him. She was sitting on the side of the bed in the low light of a single lamp. 'What time is it?' he asked, lifting himself up. 'It's six thirty, everyone's in the Hall having dinner. How are you feeling?' 'Tired.' He said as he took the tray she handed him. He eyed the roast with a sigh. At least the plate wasn't piled high. 'I didn't put too much on,' she said uncannily. 'Thanks' He cut the meat and placed it in his mouth.

Ginny stayed with him while he ate, keeping her conversation light as she talked mostly about Hedwig. Harry asked after Socks, wondering why he hadn't seen much of her around the castle since his stay in the hospital wing, and Ginny told him she had disappeared almost three weeks ago. When Harry looked startled she added that Socks had been the same ever since she'd known her, which was almost a year. Far longer than Harry would have guessed since Ginny had never mentioned her before.

The normalness of their conversation helped take Harry's mind off things that would have affected his appetite, so that when he finally put the tray down at his feet, there were only a few pieces of carrot and a roast potato left.

'Harry...' Ginny sounded unsure of herself, heavy with emotion as he sat back on his pillows, still finding it difficult to be under her gaze. 'Neville came to me before he left for Hogsmeade. He said something that I think you should hear...'

Harry looked Ginny directly in her slightly glazed for the first time since he returned, feeling a dull ache in his chest.

## 17. Hagger's Council and Harry's Abandonment

Harry woke late the next morning to an empty room. Easing himself onto his elbow, he pushed the curtains that shrouded his bed aside and looked through the window. It must have been close to midday. The clear blue sky seemed glaringly inappropriate to him, so he closed his curtains on it and retreated to his dank solitude.

His body no longer ached with fever, and for the first time in a long time, his stomach panged in hunger. Rubbing his fingers forcefully through his hair his thoughts turned to Ginny. She had sat with him until he had fallen asleep, even though he had made excuses for her to leave, still finding it uncomfortable to be in her company. Harry knew she had mistaken his attempts to dismiss her as feelings of guilt over Neville, never suspecting he would have betrayed her. But betrayed her, he had. Yet she had sat by his side and passed on Neville's parting words to her in an effort to console him, and they had seemed to Harry to be hauntingly final, like he had known he would not return...

The moment Harry, Ron and Hermione had left the Great Hall, Neville had gone back to the table and told the Gryffindor DA what was about to happen, giving the trio time to get away. Seamus and Dean had then proceeded to seek out their fellow DA Hufflepuffers and Ravenclaws, arranging to meet in Hagrids empty hut.

They slipped out of the Hall one by one, minus Neville, who finally went to see McGonagall, who of course reacted swiftly to the news by ordering all students back to there dormitories just as they expected. In the ensuing confusion, Neville was able to slip away unnoticed, joining the others as they planned their next move.

Horried at what could happen with an army of Quintapedes on the loose, it was decided they should follow Harry's request and remain at Hogwarts, taking on the job as Home Guard, ready to warn the castles occupants should the monsters venture to Hogwarts.

They set themselves up around the outside of the school in groups of two, lurking in the shadows of the castle, waiting. Ginny and Luna were standing, watching the Gates from a recess not far from the Hogwarts entrance, when Neville approached them. Ginny had said that he had appeared odd to her, much calmer than usual, especially given their situation.

'I-If Hogwarts comes under threat, signal with a patronus, and get back inside.' They both nodded, and then Neville took Ginny by the arm and pulled her aside. 'I have something to do, so I-I wont be here. But make sure you don't stay out here if those monsters come. You and Luna stick together, okay?'

'Where are you going?' she had asked him, but he had just frowned at her.

'Harry won't understand, but you ... you can help him to. It's what I have to do, the same as he has his destiny.' Ginny was beginning to see where he was going with this.

'Neville, I really don't think you should-'

'Don't worry,' he interrupted her gravely 'I know what I'm doing. It'll be okay.' He had held his hand up to her, silencing her protest. 'Just tell H-Harry that. Tell him its what I have to do, and its okay.'

'Oh, look!' Ginny turned at Luna's whispered warning, just in time to see Professor McGonagall and Slughorn hurrying out of the massive oak doors, and down to the gates. She watched, crouched into the shadows as they went through, locking it behind them, and when she turned back to Neville, he had gone.

Harry pushed the conversation he'd had with Ginny from his mind and finally pulled the curtains back from his bed, and squinting in the brightness that poured into the room, he pulled his clothes on and headed down the stairs.

He passed two students as he went, neither of who would meet his gaze as it fell on them. Harry felt stabs of anger in his chest as he continued down the stairwell. When he reached the bottom, the few people who milled around the common room chatting to one another suddenly seemed to find the floor very interesting, as they stood shuffling their feet in silence.

Those who had been flicking idly through spell books took a sudden interest in them, burying their noses deep as if their very lives depended on the knowledge that lay within. Harry ignored their obvious avoidance of him and crossed the floor, leaving through the portrait hole without looking back.

As he made his way through the corridors, he passed yet more students who seemed suddenly fascinated with the drab stone walls or the scuffed floor, and by the time he entered the courtyard, he was beginning to feel like the invisible boy, when a voice broke into his thoughts.

'Harry'

He looked over his shoulder to see Luna Lovegood coming towards him from under the giant willow tree, where her fellow DA members lingered. The anger in him faded instantly as he saw her abnormally large eyes glistening with barely held tears. He walked over to meet her half way, stopping awkwardly in front of her.

She and Neville had been good friends, maybe even more than that, and he could sense she needed something from him. She stepped forward and hugged him, and for some reason, even though he had loathed any touch until then, he didn't pull away. In fact, he hugged her back, and even found some solace in her embrace.

'Neville would have followed you anywhere,' she said in her far away voice. Harry tightened his arms around her briefly as he swallowed back the pain. 'He was right to believe in you.' She said, pulling away as the others came up behind her. 'We still ... believe in you.'

A hand came down on his shoulder and Harry looked up to see Seamus standing beside him with Dean at his back. He scanned the forlorn faces before him. Ernie and Susan were looking on with pained smiles, and Hannah and Lavender both had quiet tears running down their faces as Justin nodded at him reassuringly. The Creevey brothers, though their faces were long and pale, both held their thumbs up in approval. Having their support in the face of so much grief brought a lump to his throat. Unable to talk, he nodded his head in thanks, before turning from them and heading to the lake.

Harry felt like his life was slowly crumbling down around him. Things had gotten so difficult, and messy, that he was beginning to feel like he'd lost his way. Where once he had known the direction he must take, full of determination and conviction, now ... now he felt like he was wandering blindly in the dark, the path lost to him forever.

Trudging down the sludgy snow scattered slopes, he registered a puff of smoke rising into the air out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he realized it was coming from Hagrid's hut, so he abruptly changed direction and headed over to it, his heartbeat quickening along with his footsteps at the thoughts that Hagrid was back. He at least, was okay. As he climbed the stairs, he could hear muffled voices coming from within. His hand was raised, ready to knock, when he heard something that made him freeze.

*'I'm really worried about him, Hagrid.'* Hermione's voice was unmistakable. *'You should see him. You'd barely recognize him. He doesn't eat, he looks ill all of time. He's pushing himself too hard. If he's not careful he wont...'*

Harry thrust the door open having heard enough. Hermione was seated in one of the huge wooden, oversized chairs at the table, with Ron standing behind her, and Hagrid bent over the fire, poking at it with a long forked metal prong. Three startled faces looked over at him as he glared at them angrily, infuriated that they were discussing him as if he needed watching. He had taken care of himself his whole life in one way or another, and the last thing he needed right now was his closest friends ganging up on him. Doubting him.

'Harry!' Hermione's faced flushed bright pink guiltily. 'How are you fee-'

'I don't appreciate being talked about behind my back.' Harry said angrily through gritted teeth, his excitement over seeing Hagrid safe and sound, overtaken by his ire.

'We weren't,' Ron said with surprise 'we thought you were still sleeping or we would have-'

'Oh really, you weren't?' Harry glared at them. He had felt under a great deal of pressure lately, even before the added burden of Neville's death, but he had thought he'd been dealing with it all

rather well. He had thought he was facing up to his responsibilities. They couldn't possibly understand what it was like for him.

'I think it's time you two wen' up to lunch,' Hagrid said looking at Ron and Hermione from under his brow, then turning Harry, he said 'and you ... you and I have some catchin' up to do.'

Hermione stood up, eyeing Harry with uncertainty, and he noticed her hand sought out Ron's, closing around it so tightly her knuckles whitened.

'We'll see you after lunch,' Ron said. Harry stepped aside, suddenly unwilling to vent his anger on them further. He had seen the hurt look on Ron's face, and he chided himself for being so tense. They were his best friends. Rightly or wrongly, they were concerned about him. The door clicked shut behind them before Hagrid spoke again.

'Looks like we both have some s'plainin' to do.'

Harry sat himself stiffly in Hermione's vacated chair, eyeing Hagrid warily. Hagrid stopped prodding the burning wood and without looking at Harry, he went to the cupboards and busied himself with making a pot of tea.

'I was gonna come up and see yeh later, but its better yer here. Ron tells me you've been busy.' 'You could say that.' Harry aimed at Hagrid, who still had his back to him. He blames me. He thought. He blames me for Neville's death. Hagrid had never turned on Harry in all the time he'd known him, but now it seemed even he would not forgive Harry for letting Neville die. A sickening ache panged through him as his anger melted into regret, his body sagging in the chair.

'I'd do anything to take it back, Hagrid.' He said quietly. Hagrid stopped spooning tea into the pot as Harry added under his breath 'Anything.' He bit down on his pain as he dropped his gaze to the floor, which had become a blur. The harsh sound of Hagrid scraping a chair across the wooden floor, grated in the thick air as he sat down.

'I knew you'd be blamin yerself. As sure as I knew you would have done everythin you could to save him. An' all I can say-'

'I didn't do everything I could,' Harry lifted his gaze to meet Hagrid's pained frown. 'I was obsessed with catching Bellatrix ... I wasn't watching out for Neville. I could have stopped him ... I could have ordered him back to Hogwarts, instead I-'

'Not from what Ginny tells me, you couldn't.' Hagrid interrupted him. 'Neville wouldn't have come back here no matter wha you migh have said. He 'ad one thin on his mind when he left here. An' it seems to me, he knew he weren't comin back.' Hagrid's eyes were bloodshot and swollen as he sniffed back the tears.

'He should have come back. He defeated Bellatrix. He avenged his mum and dad. He won.' Harry said, his voice becoming more strained as he spoke. Hagrid was looking at him in deep concern. 'Remember wha he said Harry. Remember 'is partin message. It were fer you. That's how much he thought of yeh. Remember tha!'

Harry swallowed painfully and rubbed his eyes under his glasses.

'I want it all to stop, Hagrid.' He said. He hadn't meant to off-load, but Hagrid was the only one he knew who wouldn't be terrified to hear the "Chosen One" saying he wasn't up to the job. 'I'm so tired of it all.' He straightened his glasses and looked at Hagrid. 'I don't think I can do it anymore, even if I wanted to. I can't go through it again. I cant watch anyone else I care about die.'

'I know wha yeh must be feelin, but yeh know there's nothing for it. Yeh have to go on. There's no escapin it.' Hagrid's tears that had threatened ever since he sat down now came tumbling down his chubby, flushed cheeks.

Harry spoke softly, yet gravely as his eyes search the table, looking for the right words 'I feel like ... like I'm ... dying inside.' Hagrid sniffed heavily and wiped at his face with his hands.

'Its only natural, but yer strong Harry,' he said defiantly, standing again to resume pouring tea into two cups 'Dumbledore believed in you, an tha' should be good enough fer anyone, including you.'

'Dumbledore believed in Snape,' Harry said darkly to himself 'it was his fault I wasn't in any condition to help Neville.'

'Whadya mean?'

Harry looked up. At first he was stunned at what he had just let slip, but then he thought maybe he had meant Hagrid to hear. He had a need to share his experience with someone, and Hagrid somehow seemed like the right choice.

'Whadya mean, it was Snape's fault, eh?' Hagrid said irritably, frowning intently, then something seemed to dawn on him. 'He 'ad somethin to do with tha spell, didn't he? It were one of 'is!' Harry stared guiltily from under his brow at Hagrid's angry face hovering above him.

Hagrid took his silence for agreement and scoffed, slamming the two mugs of tea down on the table so hard that one of them broke, spraying hot brown liquid all over the table, the floor, and them, shocking Harry out of his gloomy despair. He jumped to his feet as Hagrid bellowed. 'Wha' the bloody 'ell is goin on? Ron and 'Ermione said there was somethin strange with yeh! Wha are yer up to, eh? Wha have yeh gotten yerself in fer?' Harry had never seen Hagrid this angry before, and he was regretting his moment of weakness, but there was no going back now.

'Before I tell you, I need to know,' Harry said, his heartbeat racing as he watched Hagrid 'Does Legilimens work on you?'

'Wha?'

'Just tell me! Can other wizards see into your mind?' Harry knew Hagrid had resistance to magic because of his Giant lineage, and hoped it meant that it worked on Legilimens as well.

'Of course they cant! ... Sept maybe Dumbledore!' Hagrid said, waving an arm about angrily. 'Wha the bloody 'ell do yeh need to know tha fer?' Harry breathed out in relief.

'Snape ... paid me a visit.' He said hesitantly.

'Paid yeh a visit?' Hagrid repeated with an undertone, still incredibly angrily. 'You've seen tha maggoty wretch?'

'Yes ... twice,' Harry swallowed. Hagrid opened his mouth but no sound came out, seemingly too outraged to know what to say. He clamped his lips together, making them disappear in his wiry beard, his eyes glittering dangerously as he leaned over the table and thrust a finger at Harry.

'You're playin a dangerous game mixin with the likes of 'im!' Hagrid said threateningly.

'It wasn't something I had much of a choice in actually.' Harry said, starting to lose his temper.

'He's no good, I'm telling yeh! He killed Dumbledore, an he'll probably use the killin curse on you an' all, once he's finished with yeh.'

'It's a risk I have to take.' Harry said slowly through gritted teeth.

'I cant believe you'd be fool enough teh ...' Hagrid seemed to be so mad, he didn't know what to say. 'YOU'LL GET YERSELF KILLED!'

'HE'S THE ONE WHO WARNED US ABOUT THE ATTACK!' Harry yelled back.

Hagrid looked stunned as they stood there, glaring at each other for a moment. Then Harry planted himself in the chair and told Hagrid about Snapes' visits, and how he had given him the scroll.

'So the spell was 'is, then?'

'Yes.'

Hagrid looked down at his enormous hands as he fidgeted with his fingers.

'Killed all of them critters, it did...' He said, fresh tears starting to form in his eyes again. Harry raised his eyebrows.

'They would have eaten people Hagrid.'

'Only cos they were put in the middle of a buffet. Never harmed no one out on their little island, did they? Kept to 'emselves, didn't they? It's not their fault.' Hagrid brushed a tear from his cheek.

Harry had not revelled in the monstrous Quintapedes deaths, but he wasn't all that sorry either.

'I didn't know the spell was going to be like that.' He said tentatively. 'I didn't know what it would do,' Harry's voice darkened again 'Snape neglected to tell us that part. Just like he neglected to tell us we would be sitting ducks for the Death Eaters when they moved in.'

'Whadya mean?' Hagrid met Harry's gaze.

'The spell had a tranquillising effect on us. It almost got Ron and Hermione killed. If it hadn't been for Lupin, they wouldn't have made it back.' Harry's anger boiled at Snapes callousness.

'Wha about you? 'Ow come you didn't fall asleep?'

'It affected me differently; Julie said it was because I was ill at the time, already coming down with a fever ... something to do with my body temperature, I don't know. But the point is Snape put Ron and Hermione's lives in danger by not warning us!'

'Oh, you've met Julie then have yer?' It was an innocent enough question, but Harry's guilt made him react evasively. He sat back in the chair without looking at Hagrid.

'Yes'

'Nice girl ... got a good heart. It was her who fixed yeh up then?' Hagrid asked raising an eyebrow. Harry nodded. Hagrid was looking at Harry curiously.

'Hagrid' he began 'you can't tell anyone about Snape, not Lupin or any other order member; not even McGonagall, okay?'

'I don't like it Harry. I mean, you said yerself tha' he didn't care enough to warn wha the spell would do to yeh.' Hagrid frowned 'Now its over, it'd prolly be best to tell 'em.'

'No,' Harry shook his head slightly 'If we do that, he'll never be able to warn us again.'

'An yeh think he will?' Hagrid asked, his beetle-like eyes widening.

'I don't know, but I do know if we expose him, he won't be in a position to, even if he wanted to.'

They both fell quiet for a moment, before Hagrid went to a cupboard, pulling out something that Harry could only assume was bread, though the thud it made as it hit the bench top made it sound more like a boulder, and then grabbing a knife that looked more like a saw, he started to hack through it.

He offered Harry a sandwich, and though his stomach still grumbled with hunger, he had sworn off Hagrids stoat sandwiches years before. Hagrid persisted, echoing Hermione's criticism saying he had dark rings under his eyes and looked thin, so that eventually Harry realized the only thing that would placate him was if he agreed to leave straight away, and head to the Great Hall for what was left of lunch.

'Where have you been, anyway?' Harry turned in the doorway as he left, to look at Hagrid.

'I've bin getting back teh me grass roots, yeh might say.' He said as he pulled what looked like a leg of cured ham off the ceiling, though Harry doubted it was anything as normal as that.

'Has it helped?'

'these things take time. I left GRAWP behind, so I can't stay long either, just in case. I came back to talk to McGonagall and Lupin.'

'Lupin? Is he here?'

'Aye. 'Least he was an hour ago, and it looked like he was in no hurry teh leave.'

Harry turned and passed through the door.

'Be careful Harry. Don't trust 'im. And don't turn yeh back on 'im either.' Harry didn't need to ask whom he was referring to.

He hurried back to the castle, bypassing the Great Hall and speeding up the passageways and stairwells until he reached McGonagall's office. Shouting the password before he'd even reached the gargoyle, he continued as it leapt aside. He rode the spiralling stairway up; stopping only when he was outside the office, where he could hear Lupins raised voice through the closed doors.

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry knocked on the door, unwilling to overhear something that would annoy him for the second time that day. Opening the door at McGonagall's command, he was surprised to see not only Lupin, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Aberforth, and Julie as well. Lupin had fallen silent the moment Harry had knocked, and as soon as Mrs. Weasley had seen Harry, she rushed at him, flinging her arms around him, and fervently patting him down as if looking for injuries, apparently unaware she was gripping him so tightly he was struggling for breath.

'Mrs. ... Weasley...' Harry managed to get out as he started to come over faint.



'Molly, let him breathe.' Lupin said, obviously aware of Harry's discomfort. She pulled away from him, her eyes swollen with tears.

'This wont do Harry, this wont do at all!' seemed all she could bring herself to say.

'Harry, I'm glad you're here,' Mr. Weasley made his way over to him and put his hand on Harry's back, directing him into the empty chair in front of McGonagall's desk. Harry sat down reluctantly, all eyes turned on him. He knew what they were thinking. They were scared for him, certainly, but there was another, more unnerving reason they wanted to talk to him.

Lupin perched himself on the corner of McGonagall's desk with his hands dug deep in the stretched pockets of his shabby fawn cardigan, staring down at him. McGonagall was sat behind the desk, looking decidedly uncomfortable as she motioned Mrs. Weasley to sit in the vacant chair beside Harry.

'We need to ask you a few questions Harry, and I want you to answer them as truthfully as you can.' Mr. Weasley said as he positioned himself with one hand resting on the top of McGonagall's high-backed chair. Harry was beginning to wish he'd gone to the Great Hall for lunch, instead of coming up here looking for Lupin. It hadn't occurred to him that he would have to face them all together like this. McGonagall refused to meet his enquiring gaze as Lupin spoke.

'How did you know about the attack on Hogsmeade?'

It was straight and to the point, and Lupin had asked it in a manner that left no doubt in Harry's mind he was expecting a good answer, and would settle for nothing less. As Lupin gazed at Harry from under his brow waiting for a response, Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'It just sort of ... came to me,' he said finally, thinking of Snapes un-welcomed visit at Grimmauld Place.

'Came to you?' Lupin eyed Harry with determination. Harry looked him straight in the eye, with at least as much conviction as he spoke.

'Yes.'

'What, like in a dream?' Mr. Weasley asked frowning at Harry.

'Not exactly, more like a nightmare.' Harry added under his breath.

They were not happy with his answer. Harry could sense the frustration and anger building behind Lupin's apparent cool persona, and he could feel the tension coming from McGonagall and Mr. Weasley as they watched them.

'I know you have been given responsibilities that you cannot share with us, however, I'm warning you Harry,' Lupin paused and held Harry's gaze 'If you continue to shut us out so completely, we may not be able to help you when you need us the most.'

'I know'

Harry breathed out and stood up, uncomfortable at seeming so vulnerable in the chair. He began walking around the office, glancing at the surrounding paintings that snorted and snuffled as they "slept".

'Harry dear, we're trying to help you.' Mrs. Weasley's voice quivered as she spoke. Harry did not look at her, but continued to walk the rim of the room, eyeing the paintings, stopping when he got to Dumbledores portrait. He looked as peaceful as ever, seemingly oblivious to the worries that plagued them all. Harry studied the portrait, waiting for what he least needed to hear, and yet knowing it was coming.

'You must understand Harry,' so it was Mr. Weasley, who would say it, Harry thought. 'All of us are invested in this war, every last one of us. Don't you see, without our help, more people are going to get killed? By not telling us what's going on, you're effectively asking us to leave the fate of our families, our friends, and everyone else for that matter, in the hands of ... of a seventeen year old boy.' There it was. Disappointment flooded Harry as he hung his head for a brief moment before lifting it again and turning on his accusers.

'Voldemort chose me. He started this. I did not appoint myself. And it was Dumbledore who taught me that I would have to meet his challenge.' Harry's voice was cool, emotionless, like there was nothing left inside to feel. 'I watched Neville die three nights ago, and Gabrielle, just over three

months ago. I watched Dumbledore murdered a month before that. And I watched Sirius killed almost a year before that.' Harry paused. The room was silent except for Mrs. Weasleys sobs, which she tried desperately to muffle with a handkerchief held to her mouth. 'Voldemort chose me.' Harry repeated. 'I used to fear the future because I felt like I had no control over it, but things are different now. Now I choose Voldemort.'

Sir and Julie had said nothing the whole time, only watching from the sidelines, almost like uninvited guests. But at this, Sir leaned sideways and whispered something in Julies ear. She nodded faintly, looking at Harry under heavy eyelids.

'I am partially responsible for Neville's death. I know that.' Harry vaguely registered their pained looks, but he continued on, not wanting their sympathy 'But he knew what he was doing that night. He went out there against my wishes to make things right for himself, and his family. And he did. And I can only hope that I can do the same when the time comes.'

Harry felt his anger rear 'Voldemort will stand accountable for what he's done ... for what he's doing. And right now, the best way to defeat him is to keep my word to Dumbledore.' Harry's steadiness was being threatened by a dull ache that had been growing within him. 'Don't you think I'm not doing everything I can to prevent further deaths? I've lost people I loved too! People who were trying to help me ... I don't want to lose anyone else...' Unable to continue, Harry battled to keep himself together as he looked from Lupin to McGonagall, noticing the doubt in their faces.

'I know this is hard for you to comprehend, but there was no other way I could have dealt with the attack on Hogsmeade. You were informed about it within minutes of me knowing what was going to happen. I was not about to put anyone else in danger if I could help it. There was no other way. You must understand! There was no other way ... ' in a fit of desperation, Harry swung round to Dumbledores portrait. 'Dumbledore, you know better than anyone ... say something! Please! Tell them I didn't have a choice!'

For a few seconds it appeared everyone waited with bated breath. Harry watched the portrait intently, relying on the fact that Dumbledore would not abandon him in his hour of need. After what felt like an eternity of silence, while the sleeping form of Dumbledore did not stir, but snoozed on, Harry began to feel the attention of the others redirected to him, staring into his back. Perhaps they felt sorry for him, or maybe even thought him mad. Harry turned from the painting, despondent and feeling foolish.

'It appears there is nothing left to say.' He walked to the door, ignoring Mrs. Weasleys distraught calls, and rode the stairs back to the passageway where the Gargoyle leapt back into place behind him. He felt alone, betrayed. Why hadn't Dumbledore backed him up? Had he been so wrong in what he did?

He made his way to his dormitory and started filling his backpack with clothes and anything he might need in the near future. He wrote a note to Ron, leaving the marauders map with him, and grabbing the chest that contained the last of his parent's possessions, he headed down the stairwell, crossed the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole. As he yanked his invisibility cloak free of his rather full pocket, a voice he had not expected to hear made him turn.

'Leaving then, are you?' The Fat Lady was looking down her nose at him, her hands grasped in her lap, and her face stony.

'That's right' Harry turned his back on her, not sure he could bear to hear her satisfaction.

'I never pegged you for a quitter.'

'What?' Harry turned on her, his anger evident in his tone.

'A quitter!' she said shortly. 'Never thought you'd give in so easily.'

'Yeah, well it looks like that's just one more thing about me people don't know.' Harry was feeling rather savage.

'You're proving them right by running away, you know.'

'I'm-not-running-away!'

'Really?' she raised her eyebrows at him. 'What would you call it then?'

'What do you care? I'd have thought you'd be glad to see the back of me.'

'And why is that?' She watched him for a moment as he had trouble meeting her gaze. 'Ah, of course, guilt... The most soul destroying of all self induced miseries.' She was watching Harry so

intently, that it unnerved him greatly.

'You were no more to blame for Neville's fate, than you are to blame for being the "Chosen One".' Her voice cracked as she said Neville's name. Harry closed his eyes briefly then resumed walking. He passed along the many corridors and stairwells, and as he descended the marble staircase, he almost collided with someone.

'Sorry' Harry said, without looking up.

'Harry'

He was yanked from his thoughts by a familiar and welcome voice. He looked back to see it was Julie who he had collided with, and now she was stepping down the stairs towards him.

'I was just on my way up to find you.' She looked almost apologetic for imposing on him. 'Aberforth said you would leave.' But Harry welcomed her intrusion.

'He was right.' Harry said.

'I know a place you can stay, for now at least. Aberforth seemed to think it might be the safest place for you at the moment ... if you're looking for somewhere, that is.'

Harry had no idea where he was headed when he packed his things, though he had a pouch full of Galleons, thanks to Bills foresight, but he was also aware that he was highly recognizable, so it had to be somewhere he could lay low.

'Sure,' Harry answered 'Where?'

'I'll take you.' Julie took his hand and led him down the rest of the staircase. Harry's eyes barely left the floor as they made their way down, deep in his own thoughts. When they reached the foot of the stairs, she stopped and embraced Harry in a warm hug. 'They don't understand, Harry. They mean well...'

'I know.' He said quietly as he squeezed her back. He had been feeling at a loose end, and was glad to have someone who could ground him again. She was in tune to what he needed, and he found he did not want to pull back from the comfortable feel of her.

Ron and Hermione came strolling into view over Julie's shoulder. They had just left the Great Hall, Hermione carefully carrying a plate full of food. He let go of Julie sharply, aware that Ron's gaze had instantly fallen on the two of them.

'I was just bringing you up some lunch.' Hermione said uncomfortably as she looked between Harry and Julie. 'I thought you might be hungry...' her voice trailed off.

'Doesn't look like he has food on his mind.' Ron said coldly as he eyed the two of them. Julie stepped back from Harry in an effort to distance herself, picking up on the awkwardness of the situation.

'I-I was just leaving,' was all Harry could manage.

'Leaving?' Ginny was stepping forward from the Great Hall entrance where she had obviously been watching them. Her eyes flicked from Harry to Julie, and then back to Harry again, taking in his backpack as she walked towards them. She stopped by Ron's side and with deadened eyes, she spoke to Harry. 'Aren't you going to introduce us?'

'Er ... this ... this is Julie. A healer. Er ... she's the one who helped me ... a-a-after Hogsmeade.' He swallowed nervously. Ron looked at Julie with a piercing glare as Harry continued, 'Julie, er ... Ron Weasley,' Julie smiled warmly at him, and took the few steps towards Ron, reaching out her hand to shake it, which softened Ron somewhat. 'And this is Hermione,' Harry added, motioning to Hermione as she off-loaded her plate full of food onto Ginny to shake Julie's hand. 'And ...,' Harry did not meet Ginny's eyes 'Ginny, Ginny Weasley.' Julie turned to Ginny.

'I'm sorry, I'd shake your hand, but I'm rather ... overloaded at the moment.' Ginny said, her hands clutching the food plate still, 'Where are you going?' she directed at Harry. Harry shrugged, and Ginny took him by the hand, pulling him away from the others.

'What you are doing?' She asked, her tone flat and her eyes dangerously overcast.

'Well, I-I don't know where I'm going-'

'That's not what I mean,' She said gravely, her eyes glistening, 'what's going on, Harry?' Harry looked everywhere but at Ginny, her pain and suspicion too much for him to face. That seemed to be all the answer she needed.

Lifting her arm, she threw the plate of food at the wall, narrowly missing a disgruntled looking portrait of a Victorian gentleman who unceremoniously scrambled for cover. Harry dropped his parent's chest, sending it crashing to the floor in an effort to grab Ginny's arm, attempting to stall her and explain, but she struggled free and scurried up the stairs with bitter tears filling her eyes.

## 18. Julie's Pen Friend

'Is she your girlfriend?' Julie asked apparently to thin air, but Harry was concealed under his cloak, trudging alongside her as they headed to the Hogwarts Gates, glad she couldn't see him.

'She was, once.' He had wanted to chase Ginny up the stairs, to try to explain himself, to make her understand, but the warning look he had received from Ron held him back.

They continued down to the gates, and once through, Harry looked about him. 'Where to?'

'Outside the Hog's Head I think. We'll go from there.'

They disappeared and appeared almost instantly outside Sir's pub. Harry followed Julie silently, still stewing over Ginny's pain. He could only imagine what she must be feeling, and going by her reaction, he was beginning to understand she might never find it in her heart to forgive him.

A sickening ache swelled in him as he thought of when he had tried to restrain her, how she had fought to get free of him. It should never have come to this. And to make matters worse, Ron was going to be almost as bigger hurdle for Harry. He hadn't said a word after Ginny had flung the plate passed Harry and then run from him. He had only glared at Harry as if he too, was feeling as betrayed as Ginny.

Harry stopped as Julie placed a rather ornate looking golden key in the lock of a small purple door, jiggling it several times in what looked like a well practiced knack. He glanced up at the sign above the narrow studio. "JAFZ" it said in large purple letters, and underneath in very small writing, there were several symbols that Harry recognized to be runes, though their meanings were lost on him.

Julie walked in and waited for Harry to enter, before closing, and locking the door behind them. Harry removed his cloak and realized he was standing in a waiting room of sorts, though it was nothing like any he'd ever been in before.

The chairs were ordinary enough, but it was the walls that caught his eye. They were not covered with the usual health warnings and advertisements for medications; instead they contained two full-length moving murals.

One of which was a small grassy hill, dotted with purple and white heather, where the long grass and the shrubs rippled gently in an invisible breeze that wafted pleasantly over them, and running through the middle of the field, a trickling stream with an old stone arched bridge connected the two banks, completing the scene. In the background was one of the most beautiful sunsets Harry had ever seen, with its fiery oranges and pinkish-purple glow adding to the surreal appearance of the picture.

On the adjoining wall the other picture, though quite different from the first, was just as beautiful. A log cabin, nestled in small mounds of the purest white snow was surrounded by massively tall, straight pine trees, which were being constantly dusted with large, feather-light snowflakes that drifted soundlessly down to the ground. The snow on the branches glittered as if someone had draped tiny white fairy lights through their perfect branches, and a warm orange glow shone from the cross-pained, cottage windows as a lazy ribbon of smoke drifted from the chimney atop the snow-laden roof, giving the cabin a homely and inviting feel. Studying the two murals, Harry had the feeling he could almost walk right into them.

'I wouldn't mind losing myself in them some days.' Julie said, as if reading his thoughts. 'Come on, I'll take you upstairs to my flat. It's not very big, but it'll do for the two of us.' They mounted the stairs marked "STAFF ONLY" and Harry found himself in a one room apartment that had a small kitchenette containing minimal cupboards and a sink, a leather lounge which was quite new looking, though it was scratched around the arms, a canopied double bed that was reminiscent of the ones at the Hog's Head, a small fireplace, and bathroom leading off from the lounge.

'I'll fix you some lunch.'

'I don't have much of an appetite.' Harry said dully.

Julie eyed him as he flung his backpack in the corner, and leaned on the back of the couch.

'That girl, Ginny ... you love her?' she asked as she moved to stand in front of him.

'I ... I don't know.' He did love her. He knew it now more than ever, but he was not sure he wanted to talk about this with Julie, or with anyone for that matter. He had managed to keep Ginny separate, protected, and he would prefer to keep it that way.

'So does she know? About us, I mean.' She had moved in so her leg leant against his. Harry met her eyes, frowning slightly.

'Us?' He asked, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

'I didn't mean it like that.' She smiled at him quickly and took a step back. 'Though from what happened, I'm guessing she's figured out there was something between us. Am I right?' She was looking for Harry to open up to her about it, but he was not willing to go into it with her.

'I'd rather not talk about it. It's not important.' He said.

'Sure.' She shrugged. 'Make yourself at home,' she turned and descended the stairs 'I'll be back in a minute.'

Harry went to the bathroom and washed his face and hands, staring at himself in the mirror. He was still tiring all too easily and figured he ought to take Julie up on her offer of food. When he emerged, she was standing at the kitchen, pulling lunch things from the cupboards.

'Maybe I will have something to eat, if that's okay?' he said as he came up behind her.

'Good to see you've come to your senses. You need three meals a day if you want to be at your peak, Harry. Here,' she picked up a cup filled with the same purple liquid she had given to him after she had brought back his memory of Neville. 'Drink this.'

'I don't need anymore sleep.' He said waving it away.

'It's not a sleeping potion; it's ... a tonic of sorts. It'll help you recover your strength.' She pushed it at him. 'Go on!' He took the cup, hesitating for a split second, and then drank it down as she watched. 'You'll feel better in no time.' She said as she smiled. She turned back to buttering the bread when there was a knock at the door.

'I forgot.' Julie said as she rolled her eyes. 'Pen's coming over tonight to help go through the books. Would you mind?' she asked as she handed him the butter knife. He took over throwing some sandwiches together as Julie greeted her visitor.

'Harry!' He looked round as Julie came up the stairs clutching an armful of paperwork. 'This is Pen,' she motioned her head to the young woman traipsing up the stairs behind her, also loaded with what appeared to be entry books 'an old friend of mine. We used to go to Hogwarts together.'

'I know who she is,' Harry said as he turned to look at the new arrival appraisingly 'Though I don't think we've ever been introduced.' As they dumped their night's work onto the small round kitchen table, Harry leaned over and offered Pen his hand. She took it hesitantly, and smiled shyly at him.

'So tell me Miss Clearwater, how is Percy these days?'

Penelope Clearwater had stayed till quite late in the evening, helping Julie with her paperwork, and though Harry had tried to make small talk during dinner, casually slipping in the odd enquiry after Percy, Pen had seemed unwilling to discuss him, saying only that he was away on business rather a lot with his job, and indicating he was somewhat secretive about what it was he was actually doing for the Ministry. In the end, Harry gave up and left the two of them to their work, retiring early because there was little else to do while he was cooped up in Julie's flat.

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When Harry woke the next morning, rubbing his scar idly as it panged, his whole body ached as he swung his legs to the floor. He had had to lay in the same uncomfortable position on the couch all night, because it was at least a foot and a half too short for him, making it almost impossible for him to move during his sleep.

Julie had offered to share her bed, but Harry had decided to settle for discomfort and keep his distance from her. Even though Ginny may never forgive him, he had neither the intention of repeating his betrayal of her, nor giving her any reason to suspect he that may have. After easing himself off the couch, Harry pulled on his shirt, took out his message log with the vague hope that Hermione might have tried to contact him, and as he flicked through the pages, he was surprised to see that she had seemingly been trying to contact him urgently since yesterday.

Her first message was that she felt sure there was a rational explanation for what they had all seen in the entrance, and that Harry should return as soon as possible to sort it all out before his absence assured his guilt. Further down the page, which she must have written first thing this morning, she had said that Ginny had refused to discuss what happened with either Hermione or Ron, and according to her room mates, had spent the entire night staring out of the window, ignoring others' pleas for her to get some sleep.

Harry's stomach twisted painfully at the thoughts of her so alone.

The next message was also urging him to return to the castle to patch things up with Ron as it appeared he had taken the events almost as hard as Ginny, and every time Hermione had tried to mention Harry, Ron had scowled her threateningly into silence.

There were several more entries, each shorter than the last, all urging Harry to come back, until the final message, scrawled hastily and limited to one line said:

*'Meet me at the Hog's Head at 11am. URGENT!'*

Harry looked at the clock on the wall in the kitchen. It was already 10.45, so he dashed to the bathroom, careful not to wake Julie, and ran some water through his hair in an attempt to push his fringe down over his scar, and then grabbing his things, he headed to Sir's pub.

He didn't stop to think to use his invisibility cloak, his mind overrun with worry about Ginny. Hermione hadn't mentioned her in the last couple of entries, and every possible horrible scenario had started to plague his thoughts, all coming to the same thing, wondering desperately if she had done something rash.

He arrived at the Hog's Head with five minutes to spare. Sir saw him and nodded to the corner of the room where Hermione was already seated. She had not seen Harry enter as her nose was buried in the latest copy of the Daily Prophet, but when Harry reached her, he yanked the paper from her hands, staring down at her impatiently. Hermione looked up startled.

'Ginny' he breathed. 'Is she ...' guilt swamped him. 'Is she okay? Is she still at Hogwarts?'

Hermione nodded in understanding 'She's still there. Don't worry. I spoke to her at breakfast.'

Harry breathed out heavily in relief and collapsed into the chair opposite Hermione.

'You need to come back, Harry. And not just because of Ron and Ginny.' She was looking at him earnestly as she picked up the copy of the Daily Prophet and tossed it in front of him.

'What's this?' he said, picking it up to study the article. Hermione had a worried look on her face as she watched Harry's eyes skim the front page.

'They're out, Harry. All of them!' Her brow furrowed as she looked for his reaction. 'A couple escaped from Azkaban about a month ago, one of them Avery, of course. But now ...' she hesitated as if it were the last thing in the world she wanted to say 'they're all out.' Harry's anger showed on his face as he continued to scan the column. 'They killed several of the ministry guards ... a-and three aurors.' Harry looked up at her suddenly. 'No-one we know' she said quickly 'but it looks like the Ministry has completely lost control.'

'Malfoy will be out too then?' Harry said in disgust as he threw the paper across the table.

'Yes, and no one seems to have a clue where they are.' The two of them were silent for a moment before Hermione spoke again.

'Harry, tell me about Julie.'

Harry took a deep breath and let out a defeatist sigh as he thought of what he should say. Life was becoming complicated enough with the mistruths he had already had to tell about Snape, and everything he was feeling over what had happened with Julie was only making it worse. It was time to tell the truth, and he felt he could trust Hermione implicitly, even if they didn't always agree.

'Sir called in Julie to help me when I fell ill after that spell we used on Halloween. He needed someone who would keep quiet about where I was, but had the healing skills to help me. She nursed me back to health, feeding me potions, and healing my broken ribs, but because of the spells effects I lost my memory of that night, so she had to perform legilimency on me so I would remember what had happened to Neville.'

Harry had been staring at an extremely small, and rather strange little man hidden in the shadows of the corner of the room as he spoke, but now he met Hermione's tentative gaze. 'It sounds strange, but I don't think I was myself. I don't know why it happened, but Julie and I ... we ... She knew Neville too, quite well through his grandmother, and I don't know ... I can't explain what it was, I was so angry ... and frustrated, that ... for some reason ... I couldn't help it ... I didn't set out to spend the night with her.' Harry sighed as he avoided eye contact with Hermione.

He finally looked up at Hermione as her eyes glazed over, ready for her to abandon him too, but instead she took his hand and squeezed it.

'Oh Harry, I'm so sorry you had to go through all of that.' Her eyes brimmed with tears. 'I'm not saying what you did was right. But I think I understand.'

'What I understand is I've messed up my friendship with Ron, and I've done something horrible to the one person in this world I never wanted to hurt.' He said gravely.

'That's why you need to come back. You have to make things right before you lose the chance to.' She suddenly changed her tact. 'Your bag was already packed when you came down the stairs.' she said. 'Why did you leave?'

Harry told her about what had happened in McGonagall's office, how they had railroaded him, and when he needed it most, Dumbledore had abandoned him. Hermione eyed him curiously.

'Dumbledore would never turn his back on you Harry.'

'You weren't there. That's exactly what he did. He had a chance to back me up, but he left me hanging.' Harry's anger surfaced again at the thoughts of it.

'He must have done it for a reason. Dumbledore's always been there for you ... think about it. Why

would he stay silent when he knows you desperately needed to hear from him?' She looked at Harry pointedly. 'He's ignored you before, and you didn't know it at the time then either, but he had good reason to.'

Just then, Aberforth brought a plate of bacon, eggs, tomatoes and toast, and plonked it down in front of Harry.

'I didn't order anything.' Harry said, looking up at him.

'It's on the house, eat it before it gets cold.' As Sir sidled away, Hermione stood up.

'I have to go. I'm meeting Zach in a few minutes at the Three Broomsticks.' She looked rather nervous.

'Really?' Harry raised an eyebrow. He'd been so caught up in his own dealings that he hadn't enquired after her for some time. 'How's it working out?

'It's fine' she replied in a high-pitched voice. Harry knew that tone in Hermione.

'Remember Hermione ... if he's too much, get out! We can always find another way.'

'Please go back to Hogwarts.' she said soberly. 'I'm just not sure you're ... in the best place for you right now.'

'I'll see, maybe in a couple of days. Give everyone a chance to cool off.'

When Harry returned to Julie's, she had left a tonic on the bench waiting for him, and he drank it down in the hopes he would feel more like his old self soon. He waited in the empty flat for hours, and when she finally turned up, they shared a dinner of curried lamb and rice she had brought back with her, and then they chatted by the fireside.

Before long, Harry was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He went to settle himself on the couch, but Julie eventually talked him around to sharing her bed, laughingly promising to resist him. So after downing her tonic, Harry collapsed on top of the sheets, not bothering to undress, and drifted off into a bottomless sleep.

It was still night when Harry was awoken, though the full moon cast a silvery glow through the room giving off enough light so that he could clearly see his surrounds. It took a moment for him to shake off his post sleep stupor before he realized that Julie was lying against him, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He reached his hand up and clasped it firmly over hers, stopping her from going any further.

'No...' Harry said with disappointment as he met her gaze. She looked hurt at Harry's rejection, and pulled her hand away before sitting up.

'I thought...' she paused for a moment. 'No one would have to know,' she said quietly 'I wouldn't tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about.'

Harry raised himself into a sitting position and put his feet on the floor. 'What happened ... shouldn't have, and it can't again.' He said soberly, staring at the floor.

She remained silent so Harry turned to look at her.

She was staring blankly in front of her, clasping the sheet to her chest. 'You're right.'

Harry raised himself off the bed and headed for the couch, pulling off one of the blankets as he went.

'I'm sorry, I guess I just figured that it wouldn't hurt.'

'I understand,' he said as he lay on the couch and threw the blanket over him. 'But it would.' He knew he had hurt her, and if he hadn't already hopelessly lost himself in Ginny, he might have



taken her up on the offer. But there was too much at stake. He didn't want to hurt Ginny knowingly again ... no matter how the need in him grew.

Harry woke the next morning to the sounds of Julie opening the door to a client downstairs. He knew it would be wrong of him to stay any longer, so he went to the bathroom, stripping off his clothing and throwing it in the corner, and stepped into the shower.

He returned to the lounge with a towel wrapped around his waist, and threw his backpack up onto the couch, pulling some fresh jeans, a shirt, and a jumper out. After dressing, he filled the pack with anything he'd left lying around the room, and then grabbing his parent's dented chest, he headed downstairs.

'Harry!'

He swung round to see Julie staring at him. She excused herself from her client who was looking rather put out as he laid out on an old hospital bed with an eyeball hanging from its socket, and hurried to head Harry off.

'Where are you going?' she asked as if it was the last thing she expected him to do.

'Back to Hogwarts.'

'Why? You know you can stay here as long as you want.' She almost seemed nervous.

'I know, and thanks ... really.' Harry looked at her worried expression. 'Is everything okay?'

'Of course!' she said quickly. 'I'm just worried about you. Er ... um, wait here for a moment!' she rushed off to one of the back rooms, leaving Harry to stare around the waiting room. The impossibly clear water trickled peacefully over the odd sized pebbles in the meadow picture, and the log cabin sitting nestled amongst the trees, whose branches bent under the weight of snow, had fresh footprints leading up to the door, the windows still giving off their warm golden glow.

'Here' Julie had returned with a crystal bottle filled with dark purple liquid, almost black in appearance. 'Take this. It's the potion ... in concentrated form, so you only need seven drops mixed with water. M-Make sure you take it everyday un-until its finished.' As she handed it to him, her eyebrows creased.

'Thanks,' Harry said as he took it from her and shoved it in his backpack.

'I'm sorry, for the way I behaved before...' she said uncomfortably. 'I don't know what came over me, it wasn't right, and ... I'm sorry'

'Forget it.' Harry said with a reassuring smile.

'Come back anytime, okay?' she gave him a light kiss on the lips. 'I'll be here if you need me.'

Harry nodded and turned, walking out the door and disappearing to appear in front of the Hogwarts Gates.

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His return to Hogwarts had been much as he expected. Ron had made himself rather scarce whenever Harry entered the same room, sitting some distance from him in class, and either retiring to bed long before was necessary, or not appearing at all until the early hours of the morning when he could be sure everyone else was asleep.

Harry grew frustrated that his dreams seemed to be filled with Julie since his return to Hogwarts, and it was not as if they were just having a friendly chat, some were dreams of the sort that were similar to the ones he'd only ever had about Ginny, and others were almost motherly. He couldn't understand it. He had thought he'd left her behind, sure his loyalties lay with Ginny, but it seemed

subconsciously, she was still very much in his thoughts.

There was another thing about sleep that had come to disturb him too. At first he found himself often waking in the morning, rubbing his finger along his scar as it tingled and panged against his forehead, but as the weeks passed, he would wake suddenly, sitting bolt upright in bed, clutching at his scar as it stung painfully.

But this was something he kept to himself. He had no idea why it was suddenly bothering him, but ultimately, as much as it disturbed him, he knew it wasn't likely to end until Voldemort was stopped.

Meal times in the Great Hall were so uncomfortable that Harry had decided to take his food down in the kitchen, where he was waited on eagerly by Dobby, and offered the occasional pungent morsels of food that were long past their best by Kreacher. But it was still preferable to sitting through Ron's dagger-like stares, and Ginny's hurtful avoidance of him, and even though Hermione had tried talking to Ron, it seemed as long as Ginny suffered, he was intent on making Harry suffer too.

Running the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes was proving more tiresome as well since Ron had stopped turning up to help. It was left to him and Hermione to manage the seventy odd students between them, though since the trio's rather famous battle at Hogsmeade, which had been spread all over the front pages of every wizarding paper and magazine within days of the event, a rather convenient effect had taken place.

The students had built up a familiarity with him over the previous months, making it difficult at times to keep order, but "The Unstoppable Chosen One" (as the Daily Prophet had described him) that had returned, rejuvenated their awe.

All except of course, Hunter, the one first year that seemed to think Harry was like a walking magnet for Voldemort. Three weeks before the Christmas break, Harry had begun teaching the students patronuses, and most, as expected, were struggling to produce even a wisp of grey smoke, but two weeks in, many of the older students were able to produce one at will.

Peter Taphet, the curly-haired first year he had met on the train, was one of those students who was still unable to produce even the wispy grey smoke, and Harry ventured over to him during one particular lesson because he had a rather worried look on his face.

'What's up?' Harry leaned down to the young boy. He had liked Peter from the first meeting, but had developed quite a soft spot for him after finding out from Professor McGonagall that not only had he lost both of his parents just over a year ago in Voldemort's first attempts at recruiting upon his return, but that he had also watched them being tortured to death as he peered through the wooden slats of the cupboard they had thrust him into. He'd had the misfortune of being placed with his only living relatives that could be found - muggles, who just so happened to be virtual clones of the Dursleys.

'I-I don't think I have a happy enough thought, Mr. Potter.' Peter's cheeks flushed as he stumbled over his words. Harry crouched in front of him and gave him a wry smile.

'I didn't have one either when I was first learning how to do a patronus.' He said kindly. 'Sometimes you have to look deep inside yourself to remember what it is that makes you truly happy. And if you can find that thought, or memory, then it's yours forever, and no-one can take that away from you.'

Peter nodded slowly, but still seemed to be unsure. 'What's your happy thought, Mr. Potter?'

Harry smiled. 'It's not always the same. As you grow, new situations create new happy thoughts.' Harry stood up and rubbed the boy's hair affectionately. 'Don't worry, you'll find one Peter, if not from your past, then I'm sure you will in your future.'

'I've got a happy thought for him!' A sarcastic voice intruded. Harry closed his eyes briefly as he turned to the familiar voice. Hunter had obviously been listening, and was grinning with malicious glee. 'You'll be stuck here at Hogwarts Taphet, since your relatives don't want you home for Christmas, so you'll have almost four weeks free of being in the company of the Dark Lords number one target. That should cheer anyone up!'

Harry started to move forward, compelled to grab Hunter by the scruff of his neck, and point out at least one other person Peter should be happy about not being around for four weeks, but he felt Hermiones hand on his shoulder, gently holding him back.

She brushed passed him and stopped in front of Hunter, crossing her arms in front of her body determinedly. 'As you are so keen to be out of here, I feel sure I can oblige you. There is a little job that needs doing, which I think you would be perfect for. Follow me.' Hunter eyed her suspiciously, but didn't dare refuse, so he turned on the spot and trailed her reluctantly out of the Great Hall.

Once DADA was dismissed, Harry had an hour free before lunch, then he had his session with Sir, but he was feeling so tired again, still not fully recovered from his illness, that he decided to take the opportunity to lie down for a while.

Once upstairs he pulled out the bottle of potion Julie had given him and mixed five drops with water, before downing it in one go. The potion was good, though unfortunately the effects didn't seem to hold him all day. He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes.

But as usual, he was finding it hard to shut down his mind, and it wasn't long before he gave up and headed back down to the common room, feeling much more invigorated now the potion had had a chance to work through him. When he emerged at the bottom of the stairs, he looked around for someone to talk to, feeling full of energy.

At first, the room appeared empty, then spying the back of Hermione's bushy brown hair, he made a beeline for her, only to slow when he realized she was in the middle of an argument with Ron. They both had their backs to him, so he decided not to reveal himself.

He had been shut out of their dealings with Zach because Ron still had not forgiven him, but Harry was getting increasingly worried about Hermione lately. She had seemed distracted much of the time, and Harry had sensed things were not going as smoothly as she had hoped. He stood silently, listening.

'He only wants to show it to me because I asked him about places that were important to his family, Ron! You need to get a grip! He's too young to be thinking about marriage! Anyway, there's other ways for me to get what I need without resorting to that!' Hermione sounded much more stressed than she would have liked to let on.

'What's that supposed to mean, other ways?' Ron asked suspiciously.

'Oh, don't be such a fool!' Harry could tell Hermione's temper was hanging by a thread. 'I'm talking about other methods that don't include a love potion.'

'Hermione, you've been working on this for weeks, and you've been ploughing him cherry "love" liqueurs all this time. Don't you think the fact that he's brought up the family wedding chapel is a humungous hint? I mean, who talks about stuff like that when you've only being seeing each other for such a short time ... he's becoming obsessed!' Even though Harry could not see Ron's face, his ears were visibly red, giving away how much it bothered him.

'Something tells me this is it, Ron. We're getting close on this one.'

'We're not the only ones getting close on this one!' Ron said darkly. 'Don't think I didn't notice the condition you were in when came back from your date last weekend!'

'What are you insinuating, Ronald Weasley?' she asked, and Harry knew trouble was coming.

'You're in over your head, and I'm telling you now,' Ron leaned over and point a finger at her 'If he oversteps the mark, love potion or not, I'll hex him so badly, they'll never get him to look the same again.'

'He hasn't over-stepped the mark,' Hermione said, and to Harry she sounded rather unconvincing. She sighed heavily. 'I just wish we could sit down with Harry and discuss this. He's the one who knows Riddle, he'd have a better idea than anyone whether it might be a good place to look.'

'Then talk to me,' Harry said as he walked forward. 'You're right, I do know more about Tom Riddle than anyone else here.' Harry looked at Ron who was all of a sudden concentrating on re-tying his perfectly secure shoelace. Harry's temper got the better of him as he watched Ron. 'Your pettiness is not only putting Hermione at risk, Ron, but everyone else as well.'

Hermione looked taken-a-back at Harry's lack of tact, and Ron looked like he was on the verge of taking a swing at him. Harry ignored their glares.

'You can't shut me out of this. It's me who has to destroy the cup. We have to work together. You don't give Ginny enough credit to face her own problems.'

Ron jumped up suddenly, but Hermione moved just as swiftly, placing herself between them.

'As much as I hate to admit it,' She gave Harry a look that said in no uncertain terms she did hate to side with him after his callousness. 'Harry's right. We need to do this together if we're going to have a hope of figuring it out.'

'Why don't you fill him in then if you're such pals?' And Ron turned to leave.

'We are dealing with something bigger than your loyalty to Ginny's hurt feelings.' Harry said coldly. 'In fact, it's bigger than all of us! If you can't find a way to put it behind you, at least for now, then you're going to end up hurting Ginny, and everyone else you care about far more than I ever could.'

Ron didn't seem to have a response to that, so Harry sat down on the couch and looked between them. 'Tell me what you've found out.'

Hermione explained how she had accompanied Zach on several dates, always bringing him a box of his favourite liqueurs laced with love potion to seal his fate. Each had a day of the week imprinted on it as a "romantic" gesture of Hermione wishes that he take just one each morning to remind him of her. Hermione said he was so arrogant he hadn't questioned her wishes, and revelled in eating one every morning with the knowledge that she would be swooning over him.

Ron chimed in at this point, his anger at Harry obviously overpowered by his jealousy at Zach's attentions on Hermione, and had sarcastically pointed out that Zach had been sending her messages everyday, and more often than not, up to three times a day, proclaiming his adoration for her. Ron had then slipped in a comment at what she must have done to get such a reaction from him, and Harry, who had been ready for something like this, had to react quickly, grabbing Hermione's half raised hand that had been heading for Ron's face, easing it down again in an attempt to stop their frustration escalating any further.

Apparently, not long ago, Zach arranged for her to meet his family. Not just a small gathering with his parents either, but his entire extended family.

Hermione said that when she had arrived, they had all greeted her warmly, and it wasn't long before the women, who had been huddled in a corner discussing her excitedly, pulled her aside and started talking wedding arrangements (this part she had wisely tried to keep from Ron, but she now found it impossible since they were all together).

Ron's face was dark and broody as it was revealed that the original Hufflepuff family had used the same church for marriage ceremonies for centuries, and although the original church had been destroyed long ago, a new one had been erected on the same site, and the tradition had been handed down to this day.

During her visits to Zach's, Hermione had already checked out the house and grounds the Smith family lived in, and it wasn't nearly old enough as it should be to hold any sort of special place for one of Voldemort's "trophies", so the church seemed the next best place to look, although she had to admit, it too was a long shot being that the only connection was that many of them had married there, and there was no connection to Voldemort himself, as there had been in the other hiding places. Harry too had doubted Voldemort would care for such a site, but it needed investigating just the same, if only to rule it out.

So Zach had taken Hermione there on the spur of the moment one afternoon, but it had been closed up, so he had arranged to meet her there so she could wander through at her leisure before passing an opinion on whether she would want to wed there. Harry registered Ron's brewing anger, so he turned his attention on Hermione, eyeing her darkly.

'I hope you're not doing anything you're ... *uncomfortable* with to get this information, Hermione.' Ron shot a look at her too at Harry's question.

'Well ... I won't pretend it hasn't had its ... awkward moments,' Harry saw her eyes seemed to grow distant as she spoke. 'But we have to follow it through.' She looked at Harry, afraid to meet Ron's penetrating gaze. 'We have to investigate every possibility. We all know what's riding on this.'

Harry hadn't liked the sound of her answer. 'I'm coming with you to the church. When are you going?'

'This weekend.'

'Don't think for a minute you're going without me.' Ron said indignantly. 'I've got a bad feeling about all of this. I don't think it's going to be as easy as you think when it all turns out for naught and you want to put Smith off.'

'Fine. You can both come.' Then she added quickly. 'But I don't want any fighting between you! We're all in this together, and quite frankly, I'm fed up with being caught in the middle!'

'I won't if he doesn't.' Ron said bluntly.

'This is too important to let our squabbles get in the way,' said Harry without looking at either of them 'anyway, my issue is with Ginny. She's the one I should be apologizing too. She's the one who needs ... It's her I want to...'

'To forgive you?' Hermione prompted. Harry changed the subject immediately.

'I'm going to lunch, you coming?'

'I'm hungry too' Hermione got up from the chair, glaring at Ron. To Harry's surprise, Ron rose and made to follow them, and suddenly, with all three of them heading to the Great Hall for lunch together, things didn't seem as hopeless as they had.

## 19. Chapel of Betrayal

Harry, Ron and Hermione passed through the gates of Hogwarts on their way to the church where most Hufflepuff graduates took their vows. The day was grey, gloomy and unwelcoming, and the air was chilled below freezing, so they dressed in layers of clothing in an effort to shut out the cold.

They had on the warmly knitted jumpers that each of them had received from Mrs. Weasley for Christmas last year, and their heavy winter cloaks, not to mention boots made from waterproof Niffler fur (one of the softest and warmest skins available).

The ground was tiresomely laden with snow, which they sank almost knee deep into as they trudged away from the gates.

'Couldn't we have waited for another time to do this? When we could actually walk across the ground, rather than having to wade through it?' Ron asked grimly.

'No, we couldn't!' Harry said sharply.

'We don't have time Ronald.' Hermione said. Then she stumbled suddenly, Harry grasping her arm and yanking her to her feet, stopping her from ending up face first in snow.

'Where is this place anyway?' Ron said gloomily 'If it's any further North of here, I'm going back to get your smorbal.'

'It's called a snorkel, and they're used under water, not under snow! Anyway, I seriously doubt you'll be needing it in London!' Hermione said wryly. 'Stop complaining and grab my arm.'

'I hope you know what you're doing.' He said to Hermione as he staggered awkwardly toward her. 'You've never done a side-along before, let alone with two people.'

Ron's sulky warning may have had more impact if it wasn't for the fact that he had just walked straight out of his boots, leaving them behind him embedded in the snow. Both of his big toes were exposed through well-worn holes in his motley old socks, and holding them up in a desperate, and fruitless attempt to avoid them touching the snow, he danced around, swearing as he tried to dig his boots out.

'Stop messing about, Ron!' Hermione said impatiently. He gave her a withered look as Harry interrupted.

'Are you sure you can get us all there?' he asked her.

'Of course I can!' she haughtily.

Ron had finally replaced his boots, though he walked as if his feet were embedded in concrete.

'I'd rather not be splinched, if it's at all possible. There aren't too many parts of me that I can spare.' He said.

'Especially the grey-matter type.' Hermione quipped under her breath.

'Look, lets just get on with it, shall we?' Harry had been listening to Ron and Hermione taking cheap shots at each other all week, and had had just about enough of it. Ron and Harry each gripped one of Hermiones arms firmly and closed their eyes as the uncomfortable compression started to set in.

A few suffocating seconds later they were standing on a rather dingy looking deserted street, which had dirty snow swept into the guttering, and several many story buildings rising either side of the road, all in a neglected state of disrepair.

Hermione headed off immediately, crossing the street and stopping before a very old, rather plain looking building, which was only identifiable as a church because it had a rather rusty steeple atop of its small peak on the roof. Ron moved off to follow her, patting himself down to check all of him had made it, while Harry stamped the excess snow off his boots, before trudging over to join them.

'Doesn't exactly look very romantic, does it?' Ron smirked.

Hermione huffed without looking at them, and climbed the few stone steps, and turning the iron ring handle, pushed the door in, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

Ron lifted his head, scanning the building glumly, before climbing the stairs and following Hermione into the darkness beyond. Harry trailed them, his mind barely on what he was doing. The moment he had arrived on the street opposite the church, a strange feeling had come over him, like maybe he'd been there before.

It took a moment for Harry's eyes to adjust to the dim light that streamed through the dirty windows, penetrating the dusty air in the small chamber they now stood in. There were about a dozen pews, skewed awkwardly and uncaringly before a small, plain altar that stood upon an unassuming platform which was covered in a tatty, multicoloured carpet reminiscent of the type you would most likely find down at the local "Horse 'n' Hound", rather than a "House of God".

Two candelabras coated with old candle wax stood upon the altar, which was shrouded in a rather dusty, yellowed embroidered doily that was stained with what looked to be blood, but upon closer inspection turned out to be red wine.

Cobwebs could be seen hanging from every arched rafter and window recess, and the worn burgundy cushions that were thrown higgledy-piggledly across the pews looked like they might disintegrate if anyone ever actually dared sit on one.

The drapes that hung from what appeared to be a line of three old disused confessional boxes, were greyish and threadbare, and had chunks missing from the bottoms of them as if they had quite literally eroded.

As Harry wandered the recesses, inspecting the old statues that were placed between each of the windows, Ron picked up a cushion, smacking it with his hand in an effort to clean it up enough to sit on. He had to lean back, holding the cushion at arms length, coughing and spluttering loudly, as he choked on the dust that billowed from it.

'Well, Hermione ... this must be every girls dream.' Ron said. She looked at him scathingly, though as she continued to eye the dilapidated décor, Harry saw her cringe ever so slightly.

'Maybe it just hasn't been used in a while...' she said, trying to sound positive, but clearly finding it very difficult to understand what on earth Zach had been thinking. 'Probably just needs a bit of a clean up.'

'A clean up?' Ron said trying to suck in the grin that curbed his lips. 'Nothing short of blasting it out of existence and rebuilding would bring this place up to scratch!' He said, obviously pleased about something.

Harry silently agreed, but decided not to involve himself.

As he walked behind the alter, he reached out and pulled aside some worn red velvet curtains that hung draped over a life size painting of a rather stately looking lady and her pet creature.

'Hermione, come and have a look at this.' He ran his fingers over the small mounds of the brush strokes, curious as to what the animal was.

'Ah! There you are, my angel!' Harry and Ron spun round immediately as Hermione winced painfully, preferring to pick up a dusty old tome from the pedestal rather than face her "intended beau". 'I must apologize for being inexcusably late, mother was fussing over which tie I should wear.' Zach waved his hand dismissively as he waltzed over to Hermione and placed his arms firmly around her waist.

'I tried to point out to her when one has so many excellent ties, all one really need do is leave it to Spider, he has the most outstanding fashion sense of any House Elf I've ever known.' He leant in to kiss Hermione's lips, though missed and getting her cheek instead as she strategically turned her face, flicking a page over idly.

'And I see you have brought along one of your little friends,' He appeared to have to drag himself away from Hermione as he made his way over to Ron, whose face was like thunder. Ron stood up and grabbed another cushion, and then just as Zach approached him with his hand extended, he began beating it sadistically. Zach doubled up as he choked and wheezed, encased in a plumb of ancient dust.

'Oh, sorry 'bout that.' Ron said flatly and placed the cushion on the pew beside him. 'Thought you might like a seat.'

'That's ...' a coughing fit ensued as he tried to speak 'quite alright...' he said between splutters. 'Actually,' he cleared his throat as his eyes watered, 'this isn't really the best place to sit and chat.' He returned to Hermione, once again seemingly unable to keep his hands off her as he pulled her back to him. She was facing Harry, giving him a rather embarrassed look, when Zach finally noticed he was there.

'Oh,' he said, less than enthusiastically, 'I hadn't realized *you'd* be coming.' Harry could tell Zach was feeling threatened by him. The story the Daily Prophet had run some time ago about he and Hermione being an item was possibly still lingering in his mind.

Rather than reassure him, Harry chose to use Zach's obvious discomfort to intimidate him, not at all happy with his need to have his hands all over her.

'Of course. Hermione and I have known each other a long time. I want to see what she is letting herself in for, and going by the state of this place,' Harry let his eyes roam the dank chamber 'it's a good job Ron and I came.'

Zach raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'You can't seriously think I'd get married in this place, let alone subject the light of my life to such filth!'

'Well, what are we doing here then? I thought you said this is where all the prominent Hufflepuff marriages take place?' Hermione struggled to turn in his firm grip to face him.

'They do, my lovely!' Zach said brightly. Harry could see Ron's fists clenching and unclenching as he watched the two of them. 'But not in this section! This is the only part of the original church that still stands. The street frontage has been kept the same drab way to keep the muggles out. The real hall lays beneath.' He finally released Hermiones waist, and grabbed her around the shoulders instead. 'I'll show you.' He said smugly.

Hermione and Zach entered one of the dilapidated confessional boxes, and as Ron went to squeeze in after them, he gave Ron a rather pompous look and directed him and Harry into an adjoining one.

'Press your wand tip to the small gold button next to the window grate.' He said, and within seconds, they could feel the floor of the boxes dropping from beneath them rapidly.

Harry and Ron steadied themselves by spreading their feet apart, but it was apparent, when they eventually stepped out of their box, that Zach had taken the opportunity of Hermiones unsteadiness, to pull her to him, seemingly willing to stoop to any level to keep her close.

Ron reached in and yanked her free as Zach was apparently loathed to let her go even after they had stopped. Her face as red as Rons, and her eyes turned to the floor as Zach, for the first time since seeing Ron and Hermione together, eyed him off challengingly. Harry removed his beanie, the warmth of the underground hall seeping through him immediately, and keen to keep things as pleasant as possible turned everyone's attention to unexpected site that greeted them.

Never would he have guessed, after just descending from the neglected chamber above, that there would be such a place of well cared for beauty, below. It was obviously a well-kept secret as there was nothing about the outside building, which indicated that rather high society wizard weddings took place here.

Hermione walked through entranced at the wondrously high arched ceiling that was similar to Hogwarts Great Hall's except instead of reflecting the weather, it housed floating cherubs who threw flower petals from small cane baskets hung over their arms, and twinkling fairies that darted gently to and fro, sprinkling translucent, glittering fairy dust on the four of them as they passed below.

The décor itself when they first entered, was a warm lemon colour with white and silver trim, but it gradually faded and changed to various other colour schemes that were just as beautiful, including lilac and palest blues with gold trims and Salmon pink and white, trimmed with a pale mushroom cream.

Great archways enclosed the aisle to the altar, which was raised on a three-tiered platform, and was decorated in an assortment of some of the most beautiful flowers they had ever seen. Harry watched Hermione as she walked hypnotically to the altar, glancing at Ron every now and then to ensure he wasn't about to lose it and blow their cover wide open. But Ron did not seem aggravated or ready to explode at all, which was surprising in an even more disturbing way than if he had looked livid. Instead he looked crest-fallen as he sat down dejectedly in one of the beautifully ornate pews, which along with the rest of the décor kept changing colour.

Harry, feeling it safe to do some real looking around, ventured off around the hall, inspecting every statue and icon, including the stained glass windows which were lit from behind magically as they were underground. He went over the altar, the pews, and even the small rooms off to the side, but



he found nothing out of the ordinary.

'Does it always do this?' Hermione asked dreamily at the colour variations.

'Oh no,' Zach said as he came up behind her, obviously over the moon at her reaction. 'This has been set up so that we can choose any colour scheme you want. On the day it will stay the way you choose.' Hermione was still staring at the ceiling. Zach spun her around to face him, and positioned his face within inches of hers.

'You can have it any way you want. It'll be everything you ever dreamed of.' He bent his head to close the small gap, and kissed her. She kissed him back for a moment, seemingly swept up in it all, but then she pulled away from him quite suddenly. Harry just made out her mouthing "not now" to Zach, before he saw Ron rise and make his way back over to the confessional boxes.

Moving swiftly to intercept him, Harry yanked him inside one of the booths. 'C'mon Ron, you know she doesn't like that prat! She's doing all of this so we can find the cup.'

'I can never offer her all of this Harry. I'll never be able to make her happy like he could. You know it as well as I do. She'd be better off with someone like him.' He said gravely.

'I think you're reading more into this than there is. So she likes the chapel, but you and I both know Hermione's not that shallow.'

'You two ready to go back?' Zach pulled the curtain back, eyeing them curiously, Hermione still firmly by his side.

'Yeah,' said Ron, his eyes seemingly unable to meet Hermiones.

'What about you?' Zach turned to Hermione. 'Ready beautiful?' Hermione nodded and they entered the booth next to Ron and Harry, and all of them began their ascent.

After being in the pristinely magical surrounds of the chapel underground, the chamber above looked even worse than it had before.

'I've got to head back, if I'm not back within the hour, mother will have half the wizarding world out looking for me.' Zach tried to move in on Hermione again, but this time she was not so distracted, and stepped towards the door so she could usher him away quickly. She gave Harry a meaningful look, and he followed her closely, dragging Ron by the sleeve of his jacket until Zach grudgingly let her go, and disappeared.

'Did you find anything?' Hermione directed her question at Harry, as it was clear Ron wasn't likely to be particularly receptive.

'No,' Harry said, his voice laced with disappointment as he replaced his beanie. 'At least not down in the new section, though I didn't really get much of a chance to check the old part out thoroughly.'

'I imagine we'll be back,' Ron goaded. 'Hermione's gonna wanna pick her colour scheme yet.'

'You're so right as usual Ronald!' She said angrily, her voice dripping with sarcasm 'That's *exactly* why I'll need to come back. Its always been a dream of mine to get married at the age of seventeen.' Then as an after thought, 'If I'm really lucky I'll be pregnant before I even leave Hogwarts!' Her anger was raising her voice to almost a shrill. 'No need to study ever again, I'll just stay at home like the good little wifie, bringing up a dozen screaming little brats. Still, there is one upside, none of them are likely to have red hair!' Ron scowled as he kicked the crumbling little stonewall, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

'You won't need to worry about that, that's for sure! Why don't you and Harry head back together?' He said nastily 'I think I'll stop in at the Three Broomsticks for a while. I hear Madame Rosmerta's been asking after me since the battle of Hogsmeade. Seamus says she's been wanting to thank me, and I think its about time I took her up on it!'

'Hah!' Hermione mocked. 'Fine!'

'Fine!' Ron returned angrily and started to walk off, but in their need for someone to back them up and justify their behaviour, they both noticed Harry was no longer with them.

He was heading determinedly down the street, now some distance from the two of them, eyeing a rather grim, square looking building, surrounded by high railings that had a set of iron gates leading to a baron looking courtyard.

'Harry! Where are you going?' She asked rather testily.

Harry continued on in the same direction, nearing the building that seemed to draw him hypnotically towards it.

'Harry!' Hermione's voice was becoming more urgent now. 'What are you doing?'

'Oi! Mate, what are looking at?' Ron was yelling.

As Harry approached the building, he was unable to speak, unable to answer their calls. Pulling up before the large iron gates, he placed a gloved hand on one of the bars as if by touching it, it would become undeniably real.

He could hear Ron and Hermione's footsteps quickening as they came up behind him, but he could not yet draw his gaze from the deadened building. The minute his eyes had fallen upon it, he knew he had seen it before. In fact, he had not only seen it before, he had been there.

Ron and Hermione were panting as they came to a halt at the gates, trying to understand what it was that had held Harry's attention so completely.

'What?' Ron breathed as he bent over and placed his hands on his knees, the cold air making it all the more difficult to draw in breath.

'This is it' Harry said, almost not daring to speak it aloud, both his gloved hands now clutching at the cold metal bars on the gate.

'This is what?' Hermione said, breathing heavily as her eyes roamed over the impossibly dull building.

Harry let go of the gate and took a step back, taking it all in. 'This is where Tom Riddle grew up.' He still spoke as if he said it too loud, it would disappear.

'What?' Ron said unbelievably as he straightened to get a better look.

'Are you sure?' Hermione too, had taken to almost whispering, whether following Harry's lead, or more likely, was awed at the realization that this was the place where the darkest wizard of all time had spent his childhood.

'This is the orphanage Dumbledore came to when he offered Riddle a place at Hogwarts.' Harry still couldn't quite believe he was suddenly faced with it. 'This is where he brought me in the pensieve.'

All three of them stood silently watching the building for a time, and then Harry took a step forward to the gates and lifted the latch. It creaked open ominously as he passed through it.

'What are you doing?' Hermione half whispered.

'It looks like someone still lives here' Harry said as he craned his neck back, staring up at a small light on in one of the third floor windows.

'So what if they do?' Ron was also whispering, obviously affected by the disturbing history of the place. 'How's that going to help us find...' he cut himself off before blurting out aloud the reason they had come.

Harry ignored them and made his way up the few stairs to the door, and lifting his hand, hesitating

for the tiniest moment, he knocked lightly, looking back at Ron and Hermione standing outside the gate. He waited with great anticipation, but no answer came.

He knocked again, more forcefully this time, and waited. It was becoming obvious that no one was in, and just as he started to descend the stairs, he heard the rough clanging of a massive bolt being slid open on the other side of the door. Abruptly it swung inwards, revealing a rather skinny, frail old woman.

She had grizzled grey hair that stuck out in all directions from a poorly twisted bun, and a number of spiky looking grey whiskers protruding from her chin. Her rather wrinkled features seemed to bare the weight of a hard life, and her clothing was drab to the extreme, yet was overlaid in stark contrast by a bright floral apron that seemed glaringly inappropriate.

'Yes?' she demanded in a crackly old voice, somewhat out of breath.

'Oh, er ... I don't mean to bother you-'

'Of course you do! Why else would you come knocking on my door?' As she spoke, she showed her crooked, yellowed teeth that looked like they were barely hanging from her receding gums, and in between those crooked, yellowed teeth, were black gaps where it seemed that some of her teeth had finally lost the battle to cling on.

Harry tried to avoid looking at it.

'Er ... um, I-I was just wondering if you know anything about the orphanage that used to be here?'

The woman paused for the longest time, just staring at him, and then a small smile crept across her crooked mouth.

'What's your name boy?'

Harry didn't know if this woman was muggle or witch, but with his beanie on his scar was hidden out of sight. 'Harry' He said 'Harry Potter.'

'Of course you are!' she said. She glanced around him at the two teenagers hovering at the gate. 'Friends of yours?' she said accusingly.

'Er ... yeah,'

'Well, its all the same to me if they want to wait out here in the cold.' She held the door open just enough to allow Harry to pass through, and as he stepped over the threshold, he looked back nervously at Ron and Hermione. They exchanged glances and walked slowly to the open door as Harry disappeared behind it. The iron-gate clanged shut behind them, making them both jump as they half glanced over their shoulders.

'Well, come on then!' the old woman crackled impatiently. 'You get to my age, you don't have time to be waitin' on people as slow as you two!'

Ron turned to Hermione, all thoughts of their previous pettiness forgotten. 'I'm not sure this is such a good idea.' He said under his breath as they continued to approach slowly. 'There's something about her-'

'You don't trust?' Hermione finished, looking just as apprehensive. But with Harry already inside, what choice did they have? They mounted the stairs, and Ron, taking Hermione by the arm, all the while placing himself between her and the grizzled old woman, entered to hallway. The door was slammed shut and bolted behind them.

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Harry stood in the familiar black and white tiled entry hall, staring up the stone stairs, pulling off his

gloves, half expecting the younger looking Dumbledore and the eleven year old Tom Riddle to come strolling down towards them. But it appeared the place was empty now, though it had an unpleasant smell that reminded Harry of Mrs. Figgs, the squib that lived down the street from the Dursleys. The frazzled old woman was watching Harry silently as he shoved his gloves idly in his cloak pocket and pulled off his beanie. Tom's old room was up there somewhere, just meters from where he now stood.

Without realizing it, Harry's hand had gripped the balustrade, and he had one foot already on the lower step as if he were about to climb the stairs. Then, as his face turned to the second landing, an unnaturally cold draft seemed to pass right through him. His hair ruffled almost unnoticeably causing a shudder to ripple down his spine as he felt the breath leave him momentarily.

'Harry?' Hermione came up beside him, but even her familiar voice was unable to drag his eyes from the floor above. 'What is it?'

'Didn't you feel it?' he breathed.

'What?' she frowned as she followed his gaze. Ron joined them at the foot of the stairs.

'What are you looking at?' He asked, watching their expressions.

'Look if you will, that's why you're here isn't it?' The woman's gravelly voice drew all of them to turn their heads and look at her. Her lips curled into a dry smile as she looked directly at Harry. 'I wish I could be of more help dear, but you won't find anything. This place has been empty for more than sixteen years. There's nothing here now but some useless old furniture, plenty of cobwebs and...' she trailed off.

'And what?' Harry dropped to the foot of the stairs again as he turned to face her. 'There is something else here too, I know. What is it?'

'What makes you think so?' she said, smiling as she raised an eyebrow. Harry's eyes narrowed.

'Because I can feel it.'

The old woman cackled at Harry's words. 'It is not my place to understand what may lurk here.' Her laughter died as quickly as it had been born. 'As Dumbledore knew well.'

'Dumbledore?' Harry asked 'He put you here?'

'He did.' Harry had the impression she did not like Dumbledore.

'What do you know about this place?' He pushed.

'It was an orphanage once.'

'And the Chapel down the road?' Harry asked intently. The woman's mild expression changed at the mention of the chapel. Her face dropped.

'I know nothing about the Chapel.' She said flatly.

'But it would have been the local chapel for the orphanage, wouldn't it?' Hermione asked innocently.

'That was before my time. For all I know, they never visited the chapel.' The woman eyed Hermione out of the corner of her eye.

'Why are you here?' Harry asked her 'What did Dumbledore ask of you?'

'He told me to mind the place. Watch over it. He knew that you would come.' She said slyly.

'How is that possible?' Harry interjected abruptly. 'I didn't know myself until just now when I stumbled onto the place by accident.'

The old woman seemed to grow nervously impatient at Harry's continued questioning. She waved her hand at the stairway.

'The room you seek is on the first floor, third door to the right.'

Harry watched the woman for a moment, eyeing her curiously as she avoided his gaze, before turning back to the stone steps.

'Don't take too long, dear!' she said in a falsely honeyed voice as Hermione and Ron fell in behind Harry.

They climbed the stone stairs as if it were the last thing they wanted to do. When they reached the first landing, Harry glanced over his shoulder to see if the woman had followed them, but she was nowhere in sight.

'She lied.' Harry said as he looked down the hallway.

'What are you talking about?' Hermione asked in a hoarse whisper.

'She lied about where Tom Riddle's room was.' Harry was speaking softly so that the three of them had to crowd their heads together.

'How do you know?' asked Ron.

'I went to Riddle's room with Dumbledore when he brought me here in the pensieve. It's off the second landing, not the first, and it was the first door.'

'But Dumbledore put her here. Why would she lie?' Hermione asked sceptically.

'I don't know.'

'Maybe she wasn't lying.' They both turned to look at Ron 'I mean, yeah, she's a bit weird, I know,' Weird was putting it mildly as far as Harry was concerned. 'But maybe she doesn't know you're here to see Riddle's room.'

'If Dumbledore put her here, she would know why I came.' Harry stated darkly.

'Maybe the room you should be looking at is that one down there.' Ron continued as he motioned his head to the doorway. 'Not Riddle's old room at all.'

Harry went quiet as he thought about what Ron had said. But it didn't seem right. Something told him it was Riddle's room that would be the only important place here to both Harry and Voldemort.

'What do we do?' Hermione's whispers were getting quieter, but more urgent. Harry looked about him for a moment.

'Ron, you wait outside the door down there,' Harry pointed to the chipped and flaky wooden third door down the hallway. 'And whatever you do, do not go into that room! Hermione, you come with me.' Harry started to move off towards the stairs again.

'Hang on, what am I supposed to do if she comes up looking for you?' Ron asked.

'Hold her off with chit-chat... and if that doesn't work ...' Harry winced as he shrugged 'Hex her.' He continued up the stairs with Hermione in tow.

'Great!' They could hear Ron mumbling as he headed down the passageway. 'Hex an old woman that Dumbledore put here to guard the place!' he scoffed 'Brilliantly cunning plan.' His voice trailed off as Harry and Hermione stopped in front of the first door after quietly making their way to the second landing.

Harry put his hand on the door handle.

'WAIT!' Hermione reached out and placed her hand over his to stop him from turning the handle. 'If this is Tom Riddle's old room, and that old woman didn't want us to get in here, then maybe its protected.' Harry looked into her worried eyes and pulled his hand away.

'Hermione, I have to get in there.' He knew there was a link, a reason the Hufflepuff chapel had led him straight to the orphanage where Riddle grew up. As they stood there, the temperature dropped dramatically, and Harry shuddered, grabbing Hermione's arm.

'Can you feel that?'

'What?' she was studying his face, trying to work out what it was he was talking about.

'Cold.' He said. Hermione looked down and saw the Goosebumps on his wrist above the hand that gripped her.

'Are you all right?'

*'I have been waiting for you, Harry Potter.'*

A chilling voice that seemed to come from no direction in particular, swept around Harry and echoed through him.

'Who are you?' he asked, his heartbeat racing as his head turned, urgently seeking the source of the ghostly being. His eyes fell on Hermione, who by the way she was looking at him, had heard nothing.

*'I am the one who will help you into his room, and I ask for only one thing in return.'* The voice rasped as the cold seeped through Harry's thick clothing. His breath was coming out frosted as he started to shiver.

'What?'

'Harry, are you okay?' Hermione was watching him as he clasped his arms about him, shrinking in the cold.

*'You must avenge my trust in him. You must swear ... no matter what the cost to you ... you will destroy him!'*

The voice hissed in what sounded like a hundred whispering voices. Harry lowered his head as images of the people Harry cared about flashed before him, lingering on Ginny.

'I can't.' He whispered.

'Harry!' Hermione had his face in her hands, trying to get him to look at her.

*'Swear it, and you shall enter!'*

'Harry! Look at me!'

Harry pulled his gaze to meet hers. He rallied every ounce of strength and conviction from her compassion for him.

'I'll do it.' He said, still shaking. 'Whatever it costs me ... I swear.'

'Who are you talking to? What are promising?' Hermione persisted.

*'Once I disarm the room, my job is done. You will be on your own.'*

The voice passed through him again.

'Who are you? Are you a ghost?' Harry repeated.

*'I am the true heir of what you seek. I am neither ghost, nor living. I bargained my death away so I could carry out this one task ... You will know when it is time to enter.'*

'Harry! What's happening? Who are you talking to?' Hermione's urgent voice penetrated Harry's concentration as the terrible coldness left him.

A whooshing sound came from inside the room and directly after, a flash of bright light splayed out from under the gap in the door. Hermione was gripping Harry's arm painfully as they both waited.

The room was silent.

'It's time.' Harry said, prying Hermione's hand off his arm. 'You wait here.'

'Harry. No way!' She said frowning at him. 'You don't know what's waiting for you beyond that door!' He gave Hermione a reassuring look.

'It's okay to enter now, and I'd rather you were here keeping an eye out, just in case.'

She nodded resignedly. 'Be *careful*.'

He reached out and turned the small round brass handle, and as it squeaked with apparent disuse, Harry took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold, easing the door open. The first thing he noticed lying in the middle of the floor was a distorted image of a shadowy transparent body that still had some solidity to it. Truly it was neither ghost nor living, and yet now that it had form, Harry knew who it was immediately.

He trod carefully around the figure and headed straight to the wardrobe. He opened it not nearly as apprehensively as he perhaps should have, already knowing that he would not find what he was looking for in such an obvious place. He then made a thorough search of the entire room, which because of the spells that had guarded it, was exactly as it had been when Harry had visited it in the pensieve. After maybe five minutes of rummaging around in the scantily furnished bedroom, he sat on the dusty, squeaky bed, defeated.

What was he looking for? It was the first time he had bothered to ask himself the question, relying purely on instinct that something had drawn him there. Not the cup, certainly not here. As he sat, his thoughts turned to what it must have been like for Riddle to grow up in such a place. It was grimmer even than where Harry himself had been raised, but the similarities were undeniable.

He thought about how many times Riddle must have sat on the edge of this bed wondering why he didn't fit in, which in some strange way seemed to mirror his own existence. He couldn't count how many times he had sat on the edge of his bed wishing he had been anywhere else. Knowing he was treated differently from those around him. Knowing he had his secrets.

Secrets.

Harry had his secrets as a boy, and had found what he thought was an ideal hiding place for them, and it had even proved to be just that as his spot was never discovered in the whole time he had used it. Without hesitating, he dropped onto his knees and inspected the floorboards underneath the bed. They were laden with years of dust, and to Harry's disappointment, they appeared to be smooth and even, and showed no signs of tampering with.

He ran his hands along the boards, collecting dust and feeling for anything that might indicate a slight anomaly, something that may indicate he was right, that he and Tom shared more in common than either of them could ever have imagined. He flicked off the sticky fluff that clung to his fingers, and his thumb jabbed painfully into a floorboard, and as he brought it up to his face to inspect the damage, he noticed the board he had hit was sitting slightly raised at one end. His thumb forgotten, he leaned under the bed and jiggled the board until it finally came loose in his hand. Lifting it away, he felt somewhat daunted at the similarities between himself and Voldemort.

It was a short while before he could bring himself to look into the cavity, though it was impossible to see anything in the darkness under the bed, so Harry pushed the bed aside, its metal legs scraping noisily across the floor. Just as he was about to reach his hand in, Hermione poked her

head around the door.

'Is everything okay?' she asked with a worried look on her face.

'Fine. Keep an eye out, I won't be much longer.'

'Okay. And Harry...' she stopped midway from closing the door. 'Be careful.' He smiled, not really understanding what he thought was so amusing, but as soon as she closed the door, he reached his hand back in and felt around with his fingers.

His finger hit upon something that felt almost like nothing. He might have missed it but it was slightly lumpy, though short, yet flat as well, almost like paper, yet not paper. He scrambled his fingers around it until he had a firm grip and lifted it out, not knowing what to expect, yet definitely not expecting what he brought out of the dark hole, and into the light near his face. He pocketed them immediately, then placed his hand back into the open space, but unable to detect anything else, he replaced the floorboard and bed, and headed for the door, again looking at the shadowy figure on the floor.

Her face, which from the position of her body Harry would have expected to be contorted in pain, was instead peaceful looking. A slight smile curled her lips below her eyes that were open, but not looking surprised or shocked at her demise, instead looking satisfied, like she had achieved something that had been a long time in the making. Harry walked to the door and turned to take one last look at what was once Hepzibah Smith, before turning the handle and being faced immediately with Hermione's concerned expression.

'I think it's time we got out of here.' He said.

'Did you find anything?'

'I don't know. I got something, but I don't know if it will help. I'll show you later, but we need to get out of here. Have you heard anything from downstairs?'

'No.' she said 'but I agree we can't afford to stay any longer.'

They collected Ron who was still standing outside the third door on the first floor, looking rather relieved to see them, and as they reached the bottom of the stone steps, they had expected to be accosted by the old woman, but she was conspicuously absent.

Taking advantage of the moment, Harry led Ron and Hermione to the front door. Unbolting it, they headed down the few stairs to the metal gate they had entered through. Once it closed behind them, they all breathed more easily as they followed Harry back down the street.

'What are we doing going back there?' Ron asked as he looked up at the steeple.

'I don't know. But I found something in Riddle's room, and I'll just bet it's got something to do with finding the cup.'

'Yeah, well fine.' Said Ron. 'But why here? Why the Chapel? We've already been through this place.' He said, then turning to Hermione he added. 'Unless of course, Hermione just can't stay away.'

'You know Ron, you can be such a-'

'This has got nothing to do with Hermione.' Harry cut her off before a full-on war broke out. 'There's a reason why the orphanage is so close to the chapel. Hermione was right, they must have used this chapel for the kids in the orphanage, and it's the perfect place for Tom Riddle to identify Hufflepuff with.' Harry crossed the road to the chapel, Hermione at his heels, and Ron walking sulkily some paces behind them.

The three of them climbed the stone steps and Harry turned the ring handle to let them in. As before it took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, but Harry was on a mission this time. He knew somewhere here there was the connection he was looking for. He took the strips from his pocket that he had retrieved from under Riddle's bed, and lit his wand to study them more closely. They were short, black and flat, but with a slightly lumpy texture, and had a small hole in one end of each of them. Hermione and Ron peered over his shoulder to see what it was he was so



interested in, and when he explained to them it was what he had come out of Riddle's room with, both of them exchanged dubious glances. Harry sighed.

'Look, I know it doesn't look like much, but it has to mean something. Why would he go to all the trouble of protecting the room, and hiding them so well if they were rubbish?' He was saying it as much to convince him as them.

'So what should we do?' Ron asked. 'Keep looking up here?' he took his wand out and lit it too.

'I don't think he would have left the cup in the new section, it just seems ... unlike him. I think he would have hidden it somewhere that had a bit more history to it.' Harry started to walk around the recesses again, eyeing the statues, looking for any clue as to where the two slightly rough black strips he held in his hand could possibly fit. Ron wandered up the centre of the aisle between the pews, and Hermione, who had also lit her wand, took the other side of the chapel.

They walked around for what seemed like ages, in such a small space, and found nothing, no clue what so ever. Hermione suggested that she go back in one of the booths to check the new part out again, but Ron immediately volunteered himself, and rushed into one of the confessional boxes as if nothing would give him greater pleasure. Harry had to smile as he watched Ron descend. He knew why Ron had gone down there. He was afraid if Hermione saw the chapel in all its glory one more time, it might just be enough to tip her over the edge.

With Ron gone, Hermione and Harry teamed up and went over everything again as they had before, still at a loss to figure out where the two stripes might fit in. They had pretty much given up, and were waiting for Ron to return, when Harry pulled back the red velvet curtains to the painting he had looked at the first time he had come in, and once again studied the stately looking woman and the unusual looking creature that was barely visible, poking out from underneath her extravagantly flowing pale yellow dress she was adorned in. Hermione scanned the picture, running her wand light over it to get a better look.

'Strange isn't it?' she said.

'You mean the fact that it's in such good condition compared to everything else in here?' Harry had noticed it too.

'What's that?' Hermione poked her wand light at the creature, whose only visible part was its face.

'I don't know, looks a bit like a ferret.' Harry chuckled as he thought of Malfoys time as a ferret.

'Harry, give me those stripes!' Hermione said seriously. Harry handed them over, and as he did so it occurred to him why she wanted them.

'You don't think...?' He watched as she placed them over the creatures face so that they ran down along the nose, and the eyes fitted perfectly into the holes at the tip of each one. Without any obvious means of adhesive, they stuck there perfectly, like they belonged. Now that they were there, it looked liked they were never missing.

'It's a badger!' Harry said, and just as he leaned in to take a closer look, the painting seemed to dissolve almost completely before there eyes. There was still a faded outline of the picture, almost as if looking through a printed fly wire, but it no longer presented a solid barrier, and as Hermione stuck her wand tip through the portal, they heard Ron emerging from one of the booths, mumbling grumpily about having buckets of glowing fairy dust dumped on him as he dusted himself off.

'Bloody Hell!' Was all that Ron managed as he came up behind them and looked at the portal. 'Guess you figured out what the stripes were all about then?'

'I can't see a thing beyond the veil, Harry.' Hermione was still waving her wand around, but it reflected nothing on the other side of the screen.

'I'll go first.' Said Harry 'Wait for me to give you the okay that it's alright to come through.' He stepped through the veil and disappeared from sight.

It was pitch black on the other side of the portal, except for the dim light that seeped through the screen, and Harry was treading slowly around the edge of the portal to make way for the others when his foot slipped. He caught himself just in time, but he realized that beyond the narrow ledge he was standing on, there appeared to be a deep cavern, an endless drop where the few pieces of stone he had knocked off the shelf with his foot did not seem to reach a bottom, they just appeared to drop, and keep on dropping. Harry's heartbeat quickened as he slammed himself against the side of the black stone wall. It took a moment for him to catch his breath before he called for Ron. He yelled for him to come slowly and carefully, and to stick to the side, so as Ron crept through the painting, he too inched his way along the opposite side to Harry, who then called Hermione.

As she stepped through eager at their discovery, her foot caught on the picture frame, and she fell through the portal with such sudden awkwardness that both Ron and Harry had a job to grab one of her arms each. She hung above the inky and seemingly endless blackness, both of them gripping her desperately. She was looking up at them with a horrified expression on her face as her legs dangled helplessly, unable to stop herself from glancing down, and terrifying herself even more.

'Hold on!' Ron said in a shaky voice as he tried to stop his grip from slipping, whilst still clinging to the wall behind him.

'And don't look down!' Harry added, then looking at Ron, he said 'Ron we'll pull her up on the count of three. Ready?' Ron nodded, but his grip slipped as his eyes widened in fear so that now he had hold of her by her wrist only. Hermione let out a terrified shriek.

'I won't let you go!' Ron sounded determined and Harry had no doubt in his mind Ron would rather fall with her than let go of her hand.

'On three.' Harry said. 'One ... Two ... Three!' They both pulled with all their might. Hermione used her feet to help push herself up the side of the rock wall. As she came higher, both Harry and Ron let go of the wall to grab her under the arms and pull her to the safety of the ledge. The minute she found her feet, she threw her arms around Ron's neck and clung to him as if her life still depended on it.

'Are you okay?' He asked quietly, one arm around her shoulder and the other softly on the back of her hair. She pulled away nodding, quiet tears dripping down her face that even Harry could see in the dim light. The three of them stood there for a moment, shaken by what had nearly happened. It was Ron who spoke first.

'You should wait on the other side Hermione.' It was less of a request and more of an order, but to Harry's surprise she did not take offence.

'I'm fine, really!' she said quietly 'Anyway, it looks like you're going to need me.'

Harry would have felt much more comfortable knowing Hermione was out of danger, but he also knew she was right. They had only just passed through and were already stuck. He knew they were definitely going to need Hermione's skills to figure this one out.

'There must be a way across!' Harry said in frustration.

'There will be, but it'll be hidden, we've just got to figure out how.' Hermione seemed to gather her wits extremely rapidly under the circumstances. 'Maybe we should edge around a bit further.' So they set off. Harry went off to the left, and Hermione followed Ron to the right. 'Use your wands!' Hermione said, but as they drew them and tried to light them, nothing happened, it seemed they didn't work in the bottomless chamber. They crept further apart, but there appeared to be no way across.

'This is useless! What we need is some sort of light, a way of showing us where the path is!' Ron said loudly so as Harry could hear him.

'Hang on!' Hermione said. Harry tried to look at Hermione, who had that wonderful tone that crept into her voice when one of her brilliant ideas emerged. 'Ron, do you have any more of that fairy dust?'

'What?' he said screwing his face up.

'Fairy dust! Do you have anymore on you anywhere?'

'I dusted it off, why?'

'Check your pockets, anywhere it might have gotten caught in your clothing!' she said growing more urgent. She started checking her own, and managed to come out with some tiny smatterings of the magically glowing dust. Ron started pulling handfuls of it out of his pockets.

'They went nuts when I was down there last time, I'm telling you!' he said as he dumped it into Hermiones beanie, which she had removed for the purpose of collecting as much of it as she could. Once Ron had emptied all of his clothing. Hermione took a small pinch of it and threw it into the chasm.

'What d'ya do that for?' Ron said incredulously, but Harry had already caught on, and searching his own clothing, he pulled out some small pinches and began throwing into the darkness before him, moving around slowly and throwing a little more each time, with Hermione doing the same thing some distance away.

'I'VE GOT IT!' Hermiones excited voiced echoed through the chasm and Harry looked up to see that lying at Hermiones feet was indeed a pathway of sorts. Lit by the translucent glowing dust, it looked incredibly narrow, and as she threw more of the fairy dust further out, the path seemed to dip slightly, the drop off again. 'Follow me!' Hermione said as she stepped out onto the path, ignoring both Ron and Harry's protests as she sprinkled the dust sparingly, revealing a stone stairway that descended for some distance as they followed it.

Harry could see by the light of the glowing dust that Ron was looking rather green, so Harry followed closely behind him, in case he started to lose his balance. Down and down the stairs went, turning left then right, all the while headed away from where they had come in. Hermione was just beginning to think she might run out of the magical light when they rounded a giant column, which they had been circling for some time, and spotted an opening.

'Through here!' she said as she rushed on.

'*Hermione! Wait!*' Harry yelled after her. He was as keen to get off the narrow stairs as she was, but they had no idea what they were walking into. Ron appeared unable to talk; possibly afraid he would lose his breakfast if he did, so he followed silently, edging along, until he too reached the opening.

As Harry followed, his scar panged painfully as his eyes adjusted to light. It appeared Hermione had already lit the old-fashioned flame torches, which hung from the dank stone brick walls. She was standing in the middle of the room looking around her in tense awe. Ron too appeared glued to the spot as he eyed the threatening ancient fixtures that littered the stone cellar. As Harry was looking around him, clutching at his scar, a very bad feeling was creeping over him. This was not safe, this was a set up, and he knew it was a trap from the moment he laid eyes on the dungeon.

'GET OUT! NOW!' He roared at his two friends, but it was too late.

Suddenly the grate Ron had been standing on dropped out from beneath him. Ron dropped out of sight as the grate slammed back into place. He groaned painfully, and seconds later his fingers were sticking through the metal mesh, and incredibly, his wand was speeding through the air and out of sight. As Harry ran to him and wrapped his hands around the rusty iron, pulling at it with all his strength, he was interrupted by Hermione's screams. An enormously loud metal clanging sound accompanied her wails, and as he looked, he could see Hermione being encased in a metal cage that immediately closed in on her, making her jump as the base slid across under her feet. The cage was then yanked roughly high in the air as Hermione clung to it.

'GET HERMIONE!' yelled Ron. He could see her in the cage as it swung wildly. She was trying to cling onto it but was being buffeted around as she gasped, falling against the harsh metal bars until she was thrown to the bottom of the cage.

'HERMIONE!' Harry pulled out his wand as he winced with the pain of his scar, but it shot out of his hand instantly, and then to his horror he felt heavy iron cuffs clamping themselves around his ankles, and huge, thick iron chains that were attached, were pulling him forcefully to the wall. Other metal chains with cuffs on the ends were flying through mid air towards his arms as he fought to avoid them. But it was no use. His wrists were clamped and drawn roughly backwards until they were secured severely against the cold stone wall, along with his feet, which were spread a small distance from one another.

The pain from the overly tight wrist and ankle clamps, and the thick, heavy chains that were pressed tightly against him was searing into his flesh, but he had little concern for himself. He yanked his head back to see if Hermione was okay, but it appeared she had been knocked out and was still lying awkwardly on the bottom of her harsh metal prison. Harry looked down at Ron, his fingers were still poking through the grating.

'HERMIONE! HARRY!' he called urgently.

'I'm ... here ... Ron...' Harry was finding it difficult to speak, not only from the pain, but he had been winded as he had crashed into the stone wall behind him. He looked back up at Hermione. A painful groan escaped her lips, and Harry's relief that she was okay was short lived as he saw her wand fly from the cage and into the hands of a sight that quite literally took his breath away.

## 20. Ice of Hatred

A figure seemed to almost glide towards Harry from out of the shadows as chilling terror struck through him. Tall and thin, robed in black with an inhumanly white face, and venomous red eyes that shone eerily against the darkness that lurked behind him. His slit-like nostrils flared slightly as he closed in on Harry, a satisfied smile sitting lightly on his thin lips as he stopped close enough to touch Harry.

Harry's scar burned furiously as he closed his eyes and tried to apparate out of his bonds, but nothing happened. No familiar compression, no suffocating feeling. When he opened them again, he was staring straight at Voldemort.

Harry's wide eyes and rapid breathing appeared to be amusing Lord Voldemort.

'You cannot simply appear and disappear in here.' He said in his cold, rasping voice. 'What would be the point of setting such an elaborate trap?' He had all three of their wands grasped in one hand, and his own in the other, and without taking his eyes off Harry for a second, he spoke to someone in the darkness behind him.

'Take these!' he said aggressively, holding the trio's wands out to the side of him 'And do not be foolish enough to leave them in here.' Harry watched as a much shorter, slumped figure emerged. It was the woman from the orphanage. She approached Voldemort in a semi-bowed position, and after taking the wands, backed away from him subserviently.

'Yes, My Lord' her crackling voice shook in fear as she disappeared through a narrow, arched doorway opposite the one Harry had come through.

'Harry?' Ron's voice came from the pit, squeaky and unsure. Harry suddenly felt sick. He knew Ron couldn't possibly see who was standing in the room with them from where he was, and he had never heard Voldemort's voice before. Voldemort's eyes left Harry's slowly, his head tilting in the direction of the pit as his faint look of amusement dissolved.

'The-The old woman, sh-she was a traitor!' Harry accused Voldemort desperately in an unsteady voice. It was the first thing that came to mind to stop Voldemort from turning his attention on Ron.

Voldemort's sinister eyes flicked back to Harry.

'Sh-she told you we were here.' Harry continued quickly 'She betrayed us. She betrayed

Dumbledore's trust, just like Snape!' Anger was seeping into his voice now, though he was still filled with terror.

Voldemort's smile returned, his harsh lips parting as he let out an indulgently icy laugh that sent chills down Harry's spine.

'It would seem your famous protector had it wrong yet again. But alas,' Voldemort flicked his hand airily as amusement sparked in his eyes 'that is not the case. The woman from the orphanage was loyal to Dumbledore ... to the last.' He was still smiling evilly as Harry shrunk under Voldemort's gaze.

'Wormtail!' Voldemort called, but yet again, did not remove his eyes from Harry. Harry saw the old woman return, her eyes nervously on the floor as she approached, not looking at Lord Voldemort, or at Harry. Harry waited for the treacherous Pettigrew to show, dreading his return.

Then he understood.

The figure standing half-hidden behind Voldemort was not the woman Dumbledore had entrusted to mind the orphanage. It was Peter Pettigrew who was fidgeting nervously with his hands.

'Yes Master?' the old woman's voice came out because of the polyjuice potion, but with the realization, Harry only saw the man who had betrayed his parents to their deaths. His fear was being overcast by his rage at Pettigrew. Still wincing from the pain his scar ached with, Harry's jaw stiffened and his eyes narrowed and he could feel his blood burning with fury.

'Ah yes,' Voldemort hissed softly. He was watching Harry's every reaction intently. 'Now you understand. I see the desire that fills you. I wonder,' He paused to flash a look at Wormtail. 'If I were to release you and give you your wand, would you kill him?'

Harry's eyes turned on Voldemort as hatred coursed through his veins. 'Do it, and find out.' He ground out, his gaze being drawn back to the dithering figure of the old woman who was shifting extremely nervously.

'An amusing idea, granted.' Voldemort was looking at Harry appraisingly. He lifted his hand suddenly and traced his cold white finger along Harry's scar. The second it touched Harry's skin, the pain that had plagued his scar as soon as he had entered the dungeon turned into intensely overwhelming, skull splitting agony. Harry clenched his jaw in an effort to quell the groans that escaped him, feeling like his forehead was readying to burst open, and then abruptly, the finger was gone. He gasped as the pain settled to a throbbing pang.

'Still hurts you so?' Voldemort said mockingly.

'Harry?' Ron was trying to pull himself up so he could see out of the grate, but was unable to see where the three of them were standing.

'SHUT UP RON!' Harry snapped. His anger and pain had driven him to yell so abruptly, but it was his fear for Ron's safety that had urged him to say it. An awful dread started to fill Harry as Voldemort looked impatiently in the direction of the pit.

'Oblige Potter, Wormtail.'.

Harry's heartbeat pounded against his chest so strongly he was certain everyone in the room could hear it.

'No!'

The old woman smiled wickedly to her self and moved slowly towards the pit. Harry's anger had been flooded by utter terror once again. He turned on Voldemort who was watching him with sadistic pleasure as Ron's fingers disappeared from view.

'NO!' Harry started struggling violently against his restraints.

'NO...' being all that would come to mind.

'NO!' Each more desperate than the last as he continued to throw himself against the iron that held him. 'Don't!' His eyes were beginning to sting with tears. He felt utterly wretched as he continued to pull with all his strength at his bonds, knowing what was about to happen, knowing he could do nothing to prevent it.

Voldemort was not smiling anymore, his stony expression unfathomable.

The old woman drew a wand from the front pouch of her floral apron.

*'Please ... please, please don't!'* A bitter tear spilled down Harry's face. *'Please...'*

She pointed it into the pit.

'Wormtail.' Voldemort's cold voice immediately stopped the woman in her tracks. 'Do not kill the boy.' He said, eyeing Harry.

A flash of red light shot out of Pettigrew's wand and there was a dull thud, and Harry knew Ron was lying in heap on the floor of the pit. Alive.

He slacked exhausted against his constraints, sickened by the fact that he had shed a tear in front of Voldemort. Sickened that he had begged for Ron's life. Voldemort's evil voice hissed.

'You see? I too can be merciful.' Harry wearily raised his head to meet his gaze. 'You will understand soon enough.' He narrowed his heartless eyes. 'Yes ... soon enough.' He lifted his wand, pointing it directly at Harry who instinctively winced. He felt warmth run through the metal that held him in place as it glowed briefly, and then summoning Wormtail, he entered the narrow archway, his billowing black cloak disappearing from sight.

Harry hung from the clamps, feeling utterly drained. He looked up to see Hermione still lying on the bottom of her cage; glad she had remained unconscious. His scar still seared with heated pain and his wrists and ankles burned as blood seeped slowly through his clothing, but he barely felt the throbbing. Suddenly he was so tired.

It was some time later before the now recognizable Pettigrew emerged from the doorway. Harry found as he watched him approach through heavy eyelids, he couldn't help but smile. He was still wearing the drab dress and bright floral apron.

'Drink this!' Pettigrew held up the cup he had been carrying with his silver hand and tried to place it near Harry's mouth.

Harry turned his head away, his hatred of the man returning. Pettigrew smiled poisonously. 'It'll help you feel better.'

Harry kept his face away from the cup. A struggle ensued as Pettigrew tried to force the drink into Harry's mouth, grabbing his head and thrusting the cup to his face, but Harry managed to avoid the silver hand. Eventually Pettigrew let him go and Harry relaxed, but there was a flash of light and a searing pain shot through his stomach. Harry slumped forward, barely conscious. His head was roughly yanked back and freezing cold liquid ran down his throat.

When he next opened his eyes, it was to Ron and Hermione's quiet voices.

*'We cant apparate, and without our wands, we don't have a hope'* Ron half whispered.

*'Just keep looking for a way to get it open. If one of us can get out, maybe we can retrieve the wands if they're not too far away.'*

There was an awful ache coming from the back of Harry's head, and pain was shooting up his arms as he tried to support his weight on his feet. There were dried bloodstains on his clothing around his wrists and ankles from his earlier struggle, and yet though pained by his injuries, he felt oddly refreshed now he had come to, and his scar no longer burned. He looked up to see Hermione

running her hands around the floor of the cage, and turning on the pit, he could see Ron's fingers searchingly inspecting the edges of the grate.

'It's no use.' Harry said. Hermione clawed her way to a standing position to look at him and he could see Ron trying to pull himself up again. 'Voldemort set the traps, you won't get through them.'

Hermione's relief at seeing Harry okay could not be quashed by the news. 'Harry!' her eyes were brimming with tears. 'We were so worried ... you're alright!'

'Harry?' Ron's more sedate voice came from the pit.

'Yeah?' Harry said starting to pull at his bonds again.

'You alright?'

'Yeah'

'Me too ... thanks to you.' Harry stopped struggling as Hermione looked down into the pit at Ron. 'That's two I owe you, mate.' Ron said solemnly.

'What are you talking about?' Hermione asked, the colour draining from her face.

'Nothing. Don't worry about it.' Harry said a little impatiently. He knew very well how she would react to Ron almost being killed and he did not fancy listening to her hysterics.

Harry resumed his seemingly pointless struggle against his bonds, but fresh blood started to seep from his old wounds making him gasp angrily.

'Harry don't, you're just hurting yourself.' Hermione was wincing as she watched him. He stopped at her words, growling in frustration.

'So it is Voldemort.' Hermione said fearfully, settling at the bottom of her cage.

'The old woman in the orphanage was Wormtail using polyjuice potion.' He said darkly 'I thought I could smell something pungent ... he must have had a cauldron of the stuff somewhere.' Harry yanked his arms against the bonds in frustration. 'I should have known that smell was the potion. I should have recognized it!'

'The same is true for us Harry, it's not like we all don't know what it smells like.' Hermione said gravely.

'No point in beating ourselves up about it now,' Ron said glumly 'we have to figure out a way out of here.'

Harry knew there was no way the three of them were going to get out. They were at the mercy of the Darkest Wizard of all Time, and without their wands, they had no chance of fighting back. None at all. They had somehow wound up exactly where Voldemort had wanted.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by Pettigrew, who had finally changed into his black Death Eater robes and was heading towards him with another cup in his silver hand. Hermione stood up to watch as he approached Harry. At the sight of Pettigrew, Harry's anger bubbled through his veins.

'Forget it!' Harry said savagely. 'I'm not taking that stuff!'

'You feel better, don't you?' Wormtail tittered, bringing the cup up before him. Harry narrowed his eyes, his anger raging as he looked at the despicable rodent before him. He wanted to rip the chains from the walls and throttle this pathetic excuse for a human being.

'Keep away from me!' he threatened.

'Have it your way' Wormtail said in a sly undertone, and once again Harry was pelted in the chest with a curse that left him almost unconscious. After the icy liquid was thrown down his throat,

Wormtail left with Hermione and Ron both yelling in the distance.

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'Potter!'

Harry lifted his head and glared into Wormtail's eyes menacingly, his strength returning with his fury at the sight of him. Pettigrew took a couple of steps back warily.

'What's the matter?' Harry asked darkly. 'Afraid of a bound and wandless wizard?' Harry had never felt such hatred as he had for this creature before him. His whole body ached with it.

Pettigrew was holding another cup. Harry eyed it knowingly. It was giving him strength, it did make him feel better and he had wasted precious time resisting it.

'Give it to me.'

Pettigrew frowned and with nervous, jerky movements, he came closer, pulling his wand out as he did so.

Harry let out a low laugh. 'You should be afraid of me.' Wave after wave of anger and distaste flowed through him. 'When I am free, you will be the first one I come for.'

Pettigrew feared Harry, he could see it, and it pleased him. The rat backed away speedily after administering the icy liquid, leaving the room in a hurried shuffle.

'Harry?' Hermione was looking down. He tilted his head back and looked at her, his rage still rippling through him. 'Are you feeling okay?'

Most of the pain had abated from him hanging by his wrists because he had been there so long, they were numb; it was more of a dull ache, though now he was awake and taking the pressure back on his feet, an unpleasant pins and needles sensation was starting to creep up his arms.

'Fine.' He said shortly. 'How long have we been here?' He asked, letting his head drop back on the cold stone, his neck aching from being hung forward for so long.

'I don't know ... days I would think.' She frowned at him 'Harry, don't take the potion. It's-'

'Have either of you had water?' Harry interrupted.

'No. Ron was asking for water in his sleep just now.' She rested her cheek against the cold metal bars. 'We're not going to get out of this, are we?' She asked almost reluctantly, sounding defeated. Harry would not lie to save her feelings. Something was slowly changing in him.

'No ... we're not.'

In the quiet that followed, he could hear Hermione's stifled sobs, which flared his anger. Crying about it wouldn't help! His scar began to sting again and unable to control himself, he started pulling against his chains with all his might, ignoring the pain in his fury at being caged. The chains rattled and clanged noisily and he could vaguely hear both Ron and Hermione calling him, but he was lost in his aggressive struggle, unaware of anything, or anyone else in the dungeon, until two red beams of light shot out in quick succession, silencing the voices immediately.

Harry stopped suddenly, panting from his efforts and blinking through his sweat at the figure standing in the middle of the room. His scar was hot with pain and the new lacerations burned under the metal. He felt his overwhelming anger ebb as an involuntary shudder ran down his spine. There was something incredibly creepy about Voldemort's expression as he approached Harry.

'You're anger and hatred will be quenched soon enough.' He said darkly. 'You shall have your wish,



when you are ready.' Harry's great hatred was reflected in Voldemorts poisonous eyes, and the realization disturbed him. He was being consumed by his anger. He could feel it eating away at him, overtaking him.

'Wormtail will no longer suffice as your only minder. It is time to send for another.' Voldemort seemed to find something amusing; a wicked smile edged across his bloodless lips as he turned from Harry.

'Water...' Harry croaked, weak now he had stopped struggling. 'They need water.' All of the invigorating strength that had possessed him moments ago was gone.

'But of course.' Voldemort stopped with his back still on Harry. 'I can be generous, as well as merciful.' He left without looking back, leaving Harry feeling grateful to his captor.

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It wasn't long before Wormtail brought in two cups. Harry watched him, despising him, hating him more with every slimy movement the rodent made. He went to Ron then Hermione respectively, enervating them back to consciousness. He then levitated the cups to each of them before turning to Harry with his face turned down, unwilling to meet his eye.

'You will have to wait until your potion is due.'

Harry yanked his arms threateningly against the chains and Wormtail seemed to jolt nervously at the sound of it before shuffling out of the room.

'What about you?' Hermione said. She was looking pallid and sickly as she stared down at Harry.

'I don't need it.' He said harshly.

And he didn't. No thirst, no hunger, and little pain considering the black and purple bruising around his slashed wrists. His ankles must have looked the same, though his shredded and bloodstained boots hid what lay beneath.

After they drank their water, Hermione took her turn to sleep, and after waiting for the sound of her steady breathing, Ron expressed his concern about her dwindling condition. But Harry could offer him little comfort in the end. He was starting to fade, the exhaustion had been slowly sweeping over him since Voldemort had left, and he was losing the battle to stay conscious. His head had dropped forward again, and the pressure was lifting from his feet as he sunk further down the wall, his arms and shoulders paining under his weight. Then he passed into darkness once more.

'So ... the Dark Lord finally has his prize.'

A horrible rasping voice brought Harry out of his darkness. As he slowly came round, Harry became aware of a stench, a smell he remembered lingeringly at first, then as his mind sharpened, he remembered well. Lifting his head, he opened his eyes in disgust. Fenrir Greyback was standing before him, smiling viciously. The repulsive smell of body odour, sweat and dirt accosted Harry's senses. The hood was down on his filthy cloak, making Fenrir's dirty matted grey hair visible, and his pointed teeth showed menacingly as he disgustingly ran his tongue around them.

'Shame he wants you alive ... for now. A taste of the flesh of the "Chosen One" would be sweet indeed!' He then licked his lips repulsively, and Harry felt himself sicken. 'I could take just enough to leave you alive.' His eyes lit up and his yellowed, claw-like fingernails tapped his thumb as if he were readying to pick a delicate morsel of food.

'Yes' he hissed, his eyes widening as if he were convincing himself of the idea. 'You would still be his, if not wholly.' He let out a barking laugh that made Harry wince. 'Wholly' he laughed again 'Holey ... Get it?' He seemed to be amusing himself but his vulgar humour made Harry's stomach churn.

'The Dark Lord himself instructed you not to touch him.' Pettigrew was hovering by the archway. The instant Harry saw him his hatred began to surface again.

Greyback grunted as he turned to Wormtail.

'I'll have my chance one day ... when he is finished with him.' He started away from Harry, and as he passed Pettigrew and disappeared, Wormtail eyed him with distaste.

Harry let out a harsh laugh.

'You think you're better than him?' Harry bit out. The sickening repulsion he had felt when Greyback had been in the room was fast being eclipsed by the unadulterated hatred that Harry seethed with the moment Pettigrew was in his sights. 'You judge him after what you did?' Pettigrew approached Harry warily.

'You don't know everything ... you also judge-'

'I know enough.' Harry cut in loathingly. 'You betrayed your best friends! My mother and father died because of *you*.' Wormtail swallowed nervously.

'There was a time you had the chance to kill me, and you didn't.' his voice was quivering now.

'I WAS WRONG!' Harry roared, throwing himself forward suddenly and making Pettigrew step back.

'Harry!' A girlish voice pleaded from above.

'Give-me-the-chance-again-and-you-would-not-walk-away.' He said through gritted teeth. Pettigrew looked far more disturbed than he should. These threats were coming from an imprisoned person and yet it seemed he truly feared Harry. Harry started yanking at his chains again out of frustration as Pettigrew made a hasty exit.

'Harry, don't!' The girl said weakly from her cage, he looked up at her and found it repugnant that she had tears streaming down her face.

'Hermione?' The pit voice said. 'Hermione, are you alright?'

'No...' The girl said. Her voice was tired and croaky as she slackened against the cage. 'I'm sick to the stomach.' she said weakly. 'Harry, whatever that potion is, it's changing you, and you have to fight it. You have to see what its doing to you...' her voice was becoming faint. Harry turned his head from her impatiently. He did not understand what she wanted of him.

'It keeps me upright and you want me to fight it? It might be my only hope of getting out of here.' He said tonelessly.

'No Harry.' Her voice sounded dull and hopeless.

'*Hermione?*' Came from the pit urgently.

'It is a way out.,' She continued wearily, as if almost asleep. 'But not the right one.' Harry looked up to see the girl's eyelids droop heavily. 'Don't lose... what makes you different... from him ... Harry...' Her eyes closed and her face slid down the bars.

'*Hermione!*' The voice from the pit kept yelling urgently, but the girl did not move. Harry stared at her blankly, unable to feel, to care. Yet something niggled at him annoyingly. He searched the floor lazily in front of him for what it was that was trying to fight its way through to him.

He looked back at the girl in her dangling cage, listening to the other boy's calls getting more and more urgent. But he felt numb.

After a while, he realized the boy had been calling his name for some time.

'HARRY!' he sounded hurt and angry. 'WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS HAPPENING TO YOU?'

He didn't answer.

'HARRY! ANSWER ME!' The boy's calls went unheeded as Harry stared out in front of him blankly.

It was a long time before the boy finally stopped trying to rouse the girl or get Harry to answer him. He pounded on the stone walls of the pit before eventually falling quiet. Harry must have dropped off because he found himself awoken by Wormtail pushing his head up with his silver hand. Fenrir was standing not too far behind.

As Wormtail pushed the cup to his lips and started tipping it down, Harry recognized immediately that the warm liquid was not the same potion he had been taking. He tried to thrust his head away, but the silver hand that gripped his face and held his jaw open, could not be moved. He choked down the liquid and was about to start viciously accusing Pettigrew of trying to poison him, when he felt a scorching heat in his rib cage. The pain from it overwhelmed him and he collapsed into darkness.

When Harry came to sometime later, it was not as before. He was weary, not the least rejuvenated by whatever it was Wormtail had given him, and the pain... He eased his weight onto his feet again and let out an involuntary groan as his neck and shoulders seared with burning heat.

'Harry?' The boy called from the pit. Harry glanced at it to see fingers poking through the grate, but he did not answer. He was tired, and angry; so angry that Wormtail had not given him what he needed, what he sought, what he craved. He did not have the strength to struggle with his bonds so he stared blankly in front of him, waiting.

'Harry, what's going on with you?' The boy continued to talk in a quiet tone. 'Hermione hasn't woken for hours, and you act like you don't care.' The voice from the pit seemed to drone on slowly, and quietly. 'Hermione was right. You need to stop taking what ever it is they're giving you. It's changing you. You need to remember why we're here in the first place.'

Cold silence reined.

'What you did to Ginny was bad enough,' It continued more angrily. Harry turned his eyes on the pit as the fingers disappeared. 'But this just might be unforgivable.'

Something in that name the boy mentioned stirred Harry. A pang shot through him, though it was something he did not recognize. Curious, he hung quietly for the longest time, trying to picture her.

'Ginny.' He breathed quietly as he stared at the stone floor. What was it that distantly taunted him in that name?

'What? What did you say?' came the suddenly urgent request from the previously deadened voice in the pit. But Harry was tired, so very tired. He closed his eyes and let the pain wash over him.

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When next he woke it was to the feel of Wormtail's silver hand on his jaw again. He did not have the strength to fight; it was a struggle to stay conscious enough to drink. He vaguely heard Wormtail griping nervously to himself about the Dark Lord coming as the cold liquid seeped through Harry, before he let Harry's head sag onto his chest and scurried away again.

After a time, the pain that raked through him started to ease, and before long he could feel enough relief to take the weight on his feet again. His strength returning, he looked around him.

There were no familiar fingers coming from the pit, and looking up to the cage that he had not thought to check last time he was conscious he could see damp hair flowing out through the bottom of the bars.

Something still niggled at him, but whatever it was, proved unreachable; he felt detached; numb. When Wormtail appeared Harry eyed him under his brow threateningly, but all Pettigrew did was look at Harry, as if inspecting him. He seemed apprehensive as he watched Harry's determined stare.

'You still want to kill me, don't you?'

'Let me down and find out.' Harry said darkly. Pettigrew dithered pathetically.

'We shall see. Fenrir will be returning shortly.' He pointed his grubby, claw-like fingernail at Harry. 'He's the one you should be worried about.'

'He's not the one who owes me.'

When Greyback returned he made his way into the dungeon the same way Harry and the others had come. As he passed Harry, his eyes widened in delight and he licked his teeth obscenely at him, repulsing Harry. Amused by the effect he had on Harry, Greyback barked a gloating laugh before retreating through the arch out of sight.

As Harry hung in the quiet, he bided his time dreaming up ways he could dispose of both Pettigrew and Greyback when he got free. Alone and in the silence he waited, occasionally flicking a glance at the pit or the cage, wondering why they interested him so. He half-hung, half-stood there for many hours. Eventually his eyelids started drooping from boredom more than anything else, and just as he was sliding down the wall; his eyes closing for the last time, a familiar feeling swamped him. He lifted his head and snapped his eyes open.

Staring back at him were two chilling red slits.

Harry yanked himself up on his feet, the Dark Lord scanning him suspiciously, lingering on his wounds. Harry had the uncomfortable feeling he was watched for a while before approached. His heartbeat raced as the red eyes narrowed.

The Dark Lord then turned from Harry and walked very slowly and deliberately to the pit. Harry watched in confusion, his eyes dropping to the floor and back again to the black cloaked figure as an unknowable ache ran through him.

The Dark Lord stopped easily on the edge of the grate and smoothly drew his wand, aiming it in the pit.

'Don't.' Escaped Harry's lips quietly. Nervously. Uncertainly. As if he had no idea why he had said it.

The Dark Lord turned his head to look at Harry but did not lower his wand.

'Why?' He asked silkily.

Harry was sweating; he could feel it running down his face as his eyes darted everywhere but at his captor.

'I-I d-don't know, I ...'

'Wormtail!' the command went out icily. Pettigrew entered through the door in a half bow, his fingers fidgeting nervously.

'Yes master?' his quivering voice asked.

The Dark Lord had lowered his wand and was heading back towards Harry.

Harry, fearing the consequences of his actions, avoided the red eyes, and instead focused on the pathetic, hateful rodent that trailed behind his master.

'I am losing patience.' The Dark Lord sounded gravely displeased. His tone was enough to cause a

wave of dread to envelop Harry. 'Concentrate the last dose.'

'Yes, my Lord!'

'And get the other two on their feet ... They will be the ultimate test.' Whatever this meant, Harry could tell it almost soothed the Dark Lords anger. Wormtail squirmed and wriggled away quickly, Harry's loathsome, penetrating gaze following after him.

The Dark Lord studied Harry, frowning. 'I will return tomorrow.' He said to himself. Harry shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, strangely aware that his scar no longer bothered him in The Dark Lords presence. The black cloaked figure turned from Harry wearing an evil smile on his thin, washed out lips. 'You shall start with something easy.' he said as he walked away. '...Wormtail ... I think.' A slow, evil laugh came from him as he disappeared through the archway.

Harry was left staring after him in relief, glad The Dark Lord had not punished him in his displeasure.

Shortly after, Greyback and Wormtail entered the room. Fenrir stood eyeing Harry as Pettigrew administered potions to the other two occupants of the dungeon. As the two prisoners slowly started to revive, Wormtail approached Harry with a cup. Harry did not move, he did not fight; he knew without it, his body would give in. He gulped the freezing liquid and waited for its effects.

Once their jailors left, Harry, who was beginning to feel very tired, having not slept in he didn't know how long, let his eyes close. But as he was drifting off, voices interrupted him.

'Hermione? ... Hermione?' came the voice from the pit.

'I'm okay.'

'What about Harry? Can you see him?' There was a creaking of metal followed by the caged voice again.

'I can see him, but he looks like he's passed out again.' The voice was wobbly as it added 'At least, I hope that's all it is.'

'I don't know that he deserves you worrying over him.' The pit voice said gravely 'He wasn't too worried about you.'

'It's that potion!' the caged voice sobbed in between words as it spoke. 'Its not Harry!'

'I don't think Harry even exists anymore.' The pit voice said quietly. 'I think we've lost him, Hermione.'

'Don't say that!' The caged voice said desperately. 'There must be some way we can reach him! There must be...' it trailed off desperately.

They both seemed to go quiet, and Harry finally felt himself edging into darkness.

'Maybe there is a way.' The pit voice said slowly, 'I mentioned Ginny earlier, and I think he was about to say something but he passed out again...'

At the sound of her name, her image flashed before him, and Harry opened his eyes.

'Ginny?' the girls voice said. '*Of course!* Harry! Harry! Are you awake? *Harry!*'

Harry ignored the calls, though something was stirring inside him uncomfortably.

'Harry! Wake up!' The girls voice was getting more determined.

'Harry! *HARRY!*' came from the pit. 'Snap out of it!'

He listened, but did not act.

'It's not working ... maybe he isn't just sleeping...' the girl's voice began to sob again. There was no answer from the pit. 'Oh Ron ... what if none of us make it? Our parents, your family...' the girl seemed highly distressed.

'We'll make it.' The boy said gravely. 'Somehow, we'll get out of here.'

'Imagine ... imagine when they t-tell Ginny...'

The uncomfortable feeling in Harry's chest surged at the mention of her name again.

'She's going to lose all of us at once! Her brother ... I've known her so long now, we're like sisters! We've always been so close because of Harry. Ginny never used to shut up about him!' her sobs were almost a laugh.

A frown was slowly creasing across Harry's brow as he listened.

'I thought it was a bit of an obsession at first. I told her to g-get on with her life ... n-n-not to wait for him to notice her. But she never cared for anyone the way she c-cares for Harry.'

Harry could not move as he listened. An ache was swelling painfully where there had been only emptiness.

'A-and when I saw them together last year, I knew she m-meant it. She did love him ... even after J-Julie' the girl's voice kept stumbling on hurriedly. 'She was so hurt ... but she said that if-if it made him happy, she would let go. Ron ... you should know ... she-she told me she only wanted him to be hap-happy. She said she'd go on loving him no-no matter what happened.' she rambled on.

The pain swelled rapidly in Harry and he began to feel sick.

'That's the kind of lo-love you'd give everything for! Re-real love. I don't think he understood ... I don't think he ever kn-knew...' she trailed off as she wept.

It was like someone reached in and took a hold of Harry's heart, shattering the ice off it. Almost like it hadn't been beating until now. With a rushing intake of breath, painful tears swelled in his eyes as he thought of Ginny. How they had parted. What he had done to her. How she would remember him. It was as though his soul was thawing, and everything that had slowly drifted away came flooding back to him.

Harry was raising his head to talk to Ron and Hermione, when several loud noises seemed to come through the door to the cavern. It was the unmistakable sound of curses hitting solid rock.

## **21. The Wolf and the Rat and the Cup**

Two Death Eaters appeared at the door to the cavern as Pettigrew darted out from the opposite archway.

'What's happening? What are you doing in here? You were ordered not to enter under-.' But one of the cloaked figures cut Wormtail off.

'We're under attack! We had no choice!'

Harry's insides sparked as he eyed Pettigrew, his hatred seething, but on hearing the voice from the lumpy looking Death Eater, his stomach dropped. The voice was that of Amycus, one of the infiltrators that had stood upon the tower the night Dumbledore was killed.

'Not so brave when it's not a sick old man outnumbered by half a dozen murderers, are you?' The two Death Eaters turned, seeing Harry hanging there for the first time as he spoke.

'You?' A woman's voice that almost certainly belonged to the other's sister, Alecko, hissed in surprise. They both seemed unable to stop staring at Harry as another small explosion came from

the cavern behind them.

'So this is the secret the Dark Lord has us guarding!' Amycus leered at Harry with narrowed eyes. Harry was so tired he was slouched against the wall having trouble keeping his head up as he stared back at Amycus through heavy eyelids.

'You're obviously not one of his most trusted servants if he hasn't told you then.' Said Harry, enjoying the venomous look he received for his trouble.

'What's happening? Who's out there?' Wormtail's eyes were wide as he dithered in the archway nervously.

'There is a group of them, came through the doors already firing. They won't be able to find their way down here though. I wiped the track behind us.' He answered.

Harry watched Wormtail as he scurried to the cavern entrance to look through the doorway. 'They're coming!' he squealed with a look of utter terror on his face as he turned back into the room.

*BOOM!*

Another explosion, louder this time, rang through the metal that held Harry to the wall. Alecko took up position behind the equipment that littered the dungeon, waiting. Amycus moved to the entrance of the cavern, trying to flatten himself to the wall, ready to take out anyone that came through in the back.

Harry started laughing lazily, as if half asleep, as he hung from his chains. They turned their heads to him, staring at him as if they eyed a madman.

'I'd rather be hanging here than be in your shoes right now.' Harry said as he eyed them with a vengeful grin.

'Shutup!' Amycus said angrily.

'If you're lucky, they'll kill you quickly...' Harry added. He was getting an immense satisfaction from watching them squirm.

'I'm warning you...' The stocky Death Eater threatened, eyeing him from under his brow.

'You have good reason to be scared.' Harry taunted. 'You better hope they get to you before I-.'

'SHUT UP!' in the time it had taken Amycus to walk a few paces from the wall towards Harry, two figures poured in through the narrow entrance.

Beams of light of all colours were darting through the air in front of him, but Harry had eyes for only one person as he watched Wormtail retreat through the archway, leaving the others to battle it out. He started tugging at his bonds in angry frustration, his hatred gathering his strength in his desperate need to pursue his parent's betrayer.

The voices that had been silent until now rang out again. Hermione screamed suddenly as a curse slammed into her cage.

'HERMIONE!' Ron shouted from the pit.

Harry struggled desperately with the metal clamps, furious to get to Pettigrew. Then all of a sudden, he was enveloped in gold light and his bonds dropped away from him.

He slumped to the ground momentarily, unused to the weight of his limbs again, but recovered quickly as he stumbled toward the archway, not bothering to stop and see who it was that released him.

He entered a long tunnel-like hallway that stretched out in opposite directions. Which way? He thought impatiently. He turned to the right, and hobbling down the tunnel with all the strength he could muster, nursing his wounded wrists, he edged carefully into the first opening he came to.

It looked like a makeshift kitchen. Two cauldrons sat atop a pile of burned wood, one much larger than the other. There was a bench top and some cutlery lying around, and cups like that which Pettigrew had been forcing liquids down Harry's throat, but no Pettigrew.

Harry ducked back into the tunnel, limping as fast as he could, the sound of fighting growing ever

more distant, slowing as he rounded the next doorway. The room he was standing in was completely black.

Lumos! He thought automatically as he brushed the sweat out of his eyes in annoyance. A sudden white glow fanned out from the gaps in a nearby cabinet. Harry yanked it open, and there on the shelf was his wand, the end obediently alight. Lying next to it were two others, but Harry reached only for his, holding it up to scan the room. It appeared to be Wormtail and Fenrir's sleeping quarters. A rusty old iron spring bed was in the corner, and a mattress on the floor near where he was standing, both laden with crumpled up bedclothes, but still no Pettigrew.

He extinguished his wand as he made his way to the last doorway off this end of the tunnel, vaguely registering noises some distance at his back, but he had no interest in what he had left behind. With almost feverish anguish at the thoughts of Pettigrew escaping him again, he lunged through the narrow gap and directed his wand at the only thing that moved.

Pettigrew stopped suddenly at the sight of Harry, a look of sheer terror crossing his face as his mouth gaped open. He was standing near a small platform in a room that had gold markings etched on the floor.

'How did y ... w-what are you ... ' Pettigrew stumbled as he stood, seemingly frozen to the spot. Harry knew he must have worn a look of unadulterated hatred on his face, because it flowed through his veins like ice. He approached Pettigrew slowly, his chest heaving as he breathed in his disgust for the creature hunched before him. He stopped a few feet short of Pettigrew, his face twisted with the thoughts of revenge, as he watched the treacherous rat squirm.

'You can't kill me' it warbled as it twisted its hands together. 'You're Harry Potter...' the voice strained in desperation. Harry narrowed his eyes and aimed the wand at Pettigrew's heart.

'I-I-I changed the potion...' it said. 'Y-You c-c-can't do it. You shouldn't be able to ... I-I-it's been almost two days ... enough time...' it blabbered on, wide-eyed and full of fear. Harry took step forward. He wanted this cretinous thing dead. He wanted it to pay for what it had done. It didn't deserve to live. His eye's blazed as the creature huddled into itself, not able to meet Harry's burning gaze. With the wand honed in on Pettigrew, Harry gritted his teeth.

The only sound that filled the chamber was Wormtail's pitiful sobs as the two of them stayed like that. Harry's wand was shaking as he stared down it hatefully.

Why was he hesitating? Why didn't he do it?

'You don't want to kill me...' it said as it dropped to its knees. 'You chose not to before!' It started to creep towards Harry as it clasped its hands together in front of its face. 'Please ... p-please spare me ... pity me! Please...' It wailed.

A surge of repulsion and pity began to rise in Harry. He took a step back so Pettigrew could not touch him as he groped for Harry in his effort to appeal to him. Harry swallowed hard.

The ice in his veins was slowly melting at the realization of what he had been about to do. He lowered his wand hesitantly, lost in a furious internal battle. Pettigrew seemed to take solace in Harry's actions, almost immediately noticing his lack of conviction and his pity.

'That's right...' he whimpered hopefully. 'You don't want to kill me ... you cant-'

*WHAM!*

Suddenly Harry was lying on his back sprawled across the floor, his wand had been flung from his hand and was rolling towards the wall. A heavy weight was on his chest and a putrid smell filled his senses.

'You're mine now!' Greyback whispered hoarsely on top of him, sniggering evilly and baring his yellow pointed teeth at Harry.

'How did you get out?' Pettigrew sounded alarmed.

'Dear Alecto opened the cage.' He sounded pained to talk and his face seemed to be undulating,



stopping Harry from struggling as he watched, too terrified to move. Greyback's mouth and nose were distorting as he half laughed, half growled in pain. His eyes rolled back in his head, but then came back down to Harry again glowing bloodshot and beastly. His face was becoming more elongated, and Harry felt jagged claws stabbing into his flesh where Greyback's hands were.

Panic struck through Harry as he realized he was about to have a fully transformed werewolf on top of him. He began to struggle again, thrashing around madly and finally starting to edge free as he inched backwards, Greyback's claws tearing through his clothes and raking down his skin as he went.

With his legs still pinned under the beast, Harry twisted on his stomach and desperately tried to pull himself free. Then all of a sudden the weight was lifted and he scrambled awkwardly to his feet, stumbling forward in exhaustion as he went.

He collided with the wall and slumped his cheek against it with his eyes closed, panting, the effort of freeing himself from Greyback robbing him of the little energy he had left. Slowly he became aware of the hairs on the back of his neck prickling uncomfortably and another panting breath other than his own.

He opened his eyes and using the wall for support he turned, dreading what he knew was coming. His eyes followed the trail of his own smeared blood along the floor as a threatening low, animalistic growl sounded. The breath left him as he met the werewolf's hungry gaze.

It slunk towards him, barring its teeth, its tongue lapping at the drool that leaked out of the side of its mouth.

Any moment it would attack, any moment Harry's life would change forever - if he lived.

The creature was within reach, its ranky breath wafting over Harry's face, eyeing him viciously when without warning, it lurched forward. Harry closed his eyes as if shutting them would somehow shut out what was about to happen. There was a high, painful squeal and Harry waited for the excruciating feel of its teeth to register, before realizing it wasn't him that had yelled.

Opening his eyes wide, the werewolf was only inches from his face, but it seemed frozen as its mouth gaped open. It dropped back slowly and as it did Harry could see something strange poking through its chest. A pitiful dog-like whine escaped its mouth as the thing that was in its chest retracted. The werewolf collapsed to the ground, gargling as if drowning in its own blood then it breathed no more.

Harry look up in astonishment at Pettigrew, who was standing with his blood covered silver hand held out in front of him, looking down at Greyback.

He shuddered and looked at Harry before turning speedily and scurrying to the exit. A figure appeared in the doorway, and a wand was raised on Pettigrew.

'NO!' Harry yelled. Tonks hesitated as she took in the sight before her, keeping her wand on Pettigrew as he turned nervously to her.

'Let him go.' Harry said as he wrenched himself off the wall behind him. Pettigrew glanced back at Harry, and then down to Greyback almost as if he couldn't believe it himself, before looking at Tonks again.

'Tonks.' Harry said as he stepped forward. 'Let him go.' She moved inside the doorway, allowing Pettigrew to pass. He skulked passed her, her wand still trained on him.

Once he was clearly gone Tonks moved quickly to an unsteady Harry, throwing his arm over her shoulder.

'Did it bite you?' She asked as they headed for the door. He didn't hear her at first, still lost in his turbulent feelings. The hatred that had flared in him for so long had been temporarily doused, but he still struggled with believing what had just happened.

'Harry! Hey!' Her concern roused him and he looked at her questioningly. 'Did it bite you?' Harry shook his head.

'No. No, it didn't get the chance.' Harry stopped. 'My wand.' He said, looking to the other side of the

room. Tonks pointed her wand at it and it flew at them and Harry grabbed it with his free hand.

'Harry!' Ron came rushing through the door and skidded to a halt on the marble flooring. Harry jolted at the sight of him. He was filthy, coated in dirt from his stay in the pit and looking extremely tired.

'You look how I feel.' Harry said with a wry smile. Ron was running his eyes up and down Harry, taking in all the blood and bruising. He swore.

'Hermione said you were in bad shape, but...' he paused as he followed the trail of blood, his eyes falling on the werewolf. He swore again. He looked up suddenly urgent 'It didn't bi-'

'No.' Harry interrupted 'It didn't.' A look of relief came over Ron's face, and then it seemed to cloud over as he watched Tonks ease Harry down onto one of the three black marble stumps that lined the room.

'I'm back Ron.' Harry said, reading Ron's expression. 'It's worn off.'

'It has, has it?' He replied soberly.

'Yes.' Harry said as Tonks peeled open several layers of his ripped and ragged clothing, frowning at the bruising and lacerations on his wrists and arms.

'Then why haven't you asked if Hermione's alright?'

Harry stared at Ron who was still eyeing him distantly.

'I-I ... w-w...' He trailed off. Tonks lifted his t-shirt to see where all the blood was coming from.

Harry looked down at the deep gashes from where Greyback's claws had imbedded themselves in his skin and torn down his back and side. It was her turn to swear as her eyes pooled with tears. Ron paled visibly beneath the dirt smeared all over his face. Harry looked away ashamed. Ron was right, he hadn't bothered to ask after Hermione, not only that, but he had run after Pettigrew in his quest for revenge, and not even stopped to see if they were freed safely.

'This is beyond my skills in healing.' Tonks said as she summoned some bandages that coiled around Harry's chest and waist. 'We have to get you out of here.' She said lowering his clothing. Just then, Hermione appeared in the doorway. She looked pale and drawn, and her hair was damp with sweat as she moved to stand beside Ron.

'You're alright?' she asked Harry quietly.

'I'm fine.' He said avoiding her gaze; suddenly aware he didn't deserve her concern. He opened his mouth to say what he knew he should have days ago, though he couldn't seem to get the words out.

'Me too.' Hermione said pityingly, seeming to understand more than he did. She stepped away from them and looked around the room, her eyes falling on the body first. Her voice squeaked as she asked 'Did it-'

'No.' Ron answered.

Tonks was helping Harry back on with his jacket and easing him off the marble pillar when Hermione's voice made them all turn to look at her.

'Harry, this is it!' she was saying as she traced her hand along the markings on the floor. Harry frowned and for the first time, looked about the room. He took in the platform in the centre and the golden runes that were played around it on the floor and the three pillars. He let go of Tonks and limped towards Hermione.

'It's here?' He asked. She looked up at him nodding.

'I think so.'

Ron came up behind him. 'What does it all mean?' he asked.

'I don't think we should be hanging around here any longer than we have to.' Tonks said, eyeing them with frowned curiosity.

'There's something we have to do before we go.' Harry turned to her with a determined look. 'I'll explain later. We won't be long.'

'What?' she asked cautiously.

'Not right now, we don't have time!' Harry said warningly. 'Please, just give us a minute.'

'Alright,' she hesitated as she frowned at him. 'I'll go back and see how Moody's getting on with his

two new friends, make sure no one else is coming.' She moved off reluctantly. When she was gone, Hermione continued.

'It's a rune triangle.' She said as she shook her head.

'What ... like the one we did at Halloween?' Ron asked sceptically.

'Well ... yes ... and no.' she said as she wove her way around the symbols. 'It's the same sort of magic, though this ... is a magical key, I suppose you might call it.'

'How do we open it?' Harry asked.

'Opening it isn't the problem,' she looked up at them warily 'It tells you how, and that is the problem.'

'What d'ya mean?'

'Well, Voldemort would have constructed this, right?' she reasoned slowly. 'He's not likely to forget how to get to the cup himself, is he? So why write a set of instructions on how to do it?' They both stared at her blankly for a moment, and then Harry caught on.

'It's booby trapped.' He said as he heaved a sigh.

'It's like a game to him.' She nodded again.

'So how do we open it without setting it off?' Ron asked

'You can't,' she said 'it will go off as soon as its opened this way, no matter what.'

'Voldemort's sick curiosity again, just like in the cave. His idea of "testing the worth" of whoever gets this far.' Harry said grimly.

'Yes.' Hermione was growing ever more anxious as she watched Harry. 'Harry, I don't think we should attempt this now. We should come back after I've-'

'you know that's not an option. It's now or never.' Harry cut in abruptly. 'Tell me what I have to do.'

'Well, for some reason it's already been partially opened,' her fists were clenching as her hands hung by her sides. 'Someone has already done most of the work to bring the pillars up.' She motioned to the marble columns.

'Pettigrew!' Harry said. 'That's what he was doing in here, he must have been trying to remove it for him.' Harry was already regretting his decision to let Pettigrew go. 'So what's left to do?' Hermione was frowning as if not sure she wanted to continue.

'Hermione.' Harry prompted. 'What do I have to do?' She glanced at the three marble pillars.

'You need to place a few drops of your own blood on each of the columns,'

Blood again, Harry thought. 'That wont be too hard.' He said wearily.

She stepped nearer the to the platform 'Then you have to stand on the triangle, and that's all it says.' But she paled as she pointed to the ceiling directly above it 'Though I have a feeling that will come down, whatever it is.' Harry looked at the triangle shape inserted into the ceiling that looked like it was made of black glass.

'What will happen then?' Ron swallowed nervously as he eyed it.

'I don't know.' She said, her eye's full of fear and concern as she looked back at Harry.

He walked over to the first pillar and yanked his jacket and jumper off, leaving only his torn and blood stained t-shirt on. Hermione gasped as he pulled the bandages off, exposing the ripped skin. Immediately blood dripped from the wounds and Harry put his wand tip to the red drops and caught some on the end of it. He let it drip onto the pillar and then moved off to do the same with the next one.

'Harry, I don't think you should be doing this now.' Hermione's quivering voice said.

'We've already had this conversation.' He said flatly, as the blood dripped off his wand tip.

He approached the last pillar without looking at her.

'But I didn't know how badly you were hurt.' Her voice was growing stronger with conviction as she spoke. 'This is going to test you beyond anything you can imagine Harry, and look at you! You shouldn't even be walking around, let alone trying to withstand who knows what!' He ignored her as he moved to go to the platform. She planted herself in front of him with a furious look on her face. 'You're not doing it! I wont let you!' She said through her teeth, her wand in hand.

Harry glared back at her for a moment, but he was too tired for an argument. He softened his look and slumped his shoulders convincingly.

'You're right. I'm not in any condition to do this.' He nodded slightly and saw the look of surprised relief on her face.

'W-We'll come back, as soon as you're healed.' She said. 'Ron, grab his clothes.' Harry allowed himself to be turned and walked to the door but ushered her in front of him as Ron walked slowly towards them holding Harry's clothes in one hand, bringing up the rear.

Ron stopped at the door, his face grim, eyeing Harry knowingly. Before Hermione knew what was happening Harry turned back and darted towards the platform. She threw herself after him, but Ron dropped the clothing and caught hold of her round the waist, restraining her.

'NO! Harry...' she sobbed as Harry reached the platform.

Within seconds he was encased in the dark glass as it dropped over him from the ceiling. His feet left the ground and his hair swirled around his head as he was immersed in liquid. Dark clouds swelled and grew around him, the blood leaving his wounds and blending with the liquid he was trapped in.

The blood on the pillars began to bubble as Harry's hands began to pound frantically against the glass-like tomb.

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Harry's vision was blurred by the icy dark liquid that suspended him, which was so cold it felt like a thousand little knives stabbing at his skin. He could just make out Ron and Hermione's figures moving beyond the glass. A sudden flash of light shot towards him, causing the watery substance around him to ripple and sending a shockwave through him, but the barrier did not break.

Harry stopped clawing at the glass to pull his own wand free of his jean pocket. *Reducto!* He thought. A beam of light cut through the water towards the glass, which was clear behind the blackish fluid, but died out before it reached its target. He shot off two more in quick succession, aware his time was running out, but neither of them made it more than a couple of inches through the liquid, which seemed to smother the beams of light rapidly.

In angry panic, Harry pressed his wand tip to the glass and fired again at point blank range. Bolts of jagged light stretched out in a web across the glass, the freezing liquid reverberating with the force of its power making Harry clutch at his ears as the pressure built up within the tomb, but the web of light died out and the glass remained.

His movements were slowing now, becoming increasingly clumsy as the cold penetrated his body. He was beginning to feel very tired as the air in his lungs ran out. His wounds were no longer stinging. His whole body felt numb.

He had slowed to doing nothing as he stared out at the two frantic figures beyond the tomb beneath heavily hung eyelids, frozen to the bone. Harry's lungs seemed to be the only part of him that could feel as they threatened to burst. So this is it? He thought, floating still in the icy black water. His heartbeat slowed dramatically and his eyes closed. He's won... Then his heartbeat stopped altogether.

Everything was quiet. And warm. And peaceful.

A smoky white mist gently wisped around him in the darkness, caressing him, growing slowly as it flowed and ebbed, seeming to gradually become thicker and take on form. Milky figures at his back were guiding him gently as he drifted towards a small warm light that glowed in the distance. All of the pain he had been in was gone, and he felt safe and at peace.

As he neared the light, he realized it had a form. He was almost on top of it before he saw it was a small golden chalice. The Cup! Harry reached out his arms as he floated before it, grabbing the two slim, cool metal handles and pulling it to him. Almost immediately he became aware he was still drifting. He looked up directly ahead of him to see a beautiful red glow that looked faintly familiar.

He could feel himself being sucked gently to it and found he was keen to reach it, when something made him stop.

*'Sweetheart,'* a hauntingly sweet feminine voice made him turn, his movements slow as if in water. His mother, Lily, was beckoning him to her with her misty white hand, his father, James, drifting at her side. Harry's heart lifted as he started using his arms to swim his way to them, but the pull of the red light was growing stronger, dragging him backwards.

*'Fight it Harry.'* His father's deep, comforting voice urged *'You can do it.'*

Harry looked over his shoulder at the light which only a moment ago had seemed so enticing and watched as it grew in size, gaping open like an enormous sinister mouth, sucking everything to it. He put all his effort into swimming his way through the thick surroundings away from it and towards his parents, still grasping the cup firmly in his hand, until finally he started moving away from the red glow.

*'That's it Harry, keep coming.'* His father encouraged Harry to kick even harder and pull himself along faster, but try as he might, they seemed to keep drifting away from him.

*'You're almost there, darling.'* His mother gave him a broad smile that warmed Harry through. He was getting nearer to them, and keen to be with them, he sped up as fast as he could.

Glancing over his shoulder the red mouth was gaining on him. He looked back at his mother and father, and using every ounce of strength in him to reach them, he swam towards them, concentrating all his effort on being with them, desperate not to let them go, until finally stopping before them.

*'You are ready for the task given to you, son'* his father said *'Have faith in yourself, as we do.'*  
*'Remember Harry, we're always with you.'* His mother said. They sounded like they were saying goodbye.

NO! Harry tried to speak but he couldn't make a sound. A heavy sadness came over him as their misty bodies flew apart to reveal a small white glowing orb. He reached his free hand out despairingly and touched it with his finger. It sunk into the light, which began enveloping him, creeping up his hand and arm gradually, until it encased his whole body.

Coughing and spluttering, pain once again searing through his freezing cold body, Harry opened his eyes to see Hermione crouched over him. He had the strangest feeling she had just been kissing him.

She was soaking wet, as were Ron and Mad-eye behind her, but Harry could still see the tears pouring down her face. As Harry pushed himself up into a sitting position she scooped him into her arms and hugged him so tightly he thought he might pass out again.

*'Don't you ever do that to us again!'* she sobbed as she rocked him in her arms.

*'Hermione let him go. You're going to suffocate him, then you'll have to do that pash of a lifetime thing again.'* Ron said seriously. Harry felt two hands grab him under the elbows and lift him to his feet.

*'It's called the "kiss of life" Ron.'* Her voice was still wobbling dangerously. Harry saw the marble floor was covered in the inky water that had encased him mixed with pools of his own blood. He was shaking uncontrollably, his teeth chattering uncontrollably as Moody threw some clothing over his back.

*'What's that?'* he asked gruffly, pointing at Harry's stomach. Harry looked down at the golden cup clasped tightly in his hand. He didn't want to speak, he didn't want to have to explain right now, and he was feeling like he might not be able to stand much longer.

*'Let's get out of here. He looks like he's not going to last long.'* Hermione said.

*'M-m-my wand'* Harry stammered croakily as he shook.

*'I've got it'* Ron said *'here.'* He slid it into Harry's back pocket. Moody growled.

*'Now what have I told you lot about storing your wands there?'* He said, helping Harry limp out the doorway and up the tunnel. *'Don't come running to me with only one buttock when it goes off'*

accidentally!' Harry tried to stay with them, but blackness was creeping into his vision. His head spun and little lights sparked before his eyes. Then his body slumped and everything went black.

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When Harry opened his eyes, he found he was at Julie's again, lying in her bed as she snoozed on a thin mattress by the fireplace. The grey morning light crept through the open curtains as the sun surfaced, so Harry edged himself up and pulled on his jeans.

His body was still sore, the bruising around his wrists and ankles were all shades of deep purple and black, but the wounds down his back and sides did not gape as they had done. In fact, they were sealed neatly together, leaving almost no marks.

Harry walked to the kitchen and put some tea on, his back to the rest of the room. He felt extraordinarily hungry, so he hunted the cupboards for something to eat, pulling out some bread and throwing together a cheese sandwich. He took two mugs out and filled them both, and then walking over to Julie and crouching down next to her, he reached out and tapped her on the shoulder.

To Harry's surprise she stirred almost immediately.

'Here.' He passed her the tea as she sat up looking at him from heavy eyelids. Her hair was ruffled and she was still fully clothed. 'How long have I been here?' he asked.

'They brought you in the early hours of yesterday morning.' She said and took a sip of her tea. Harry nodded and unconsciously reached out and pushed her hair back from her face.

'Thank you Julie.' He said, and then realizing the intimacy of the situation, he pulled his hand back awkwardly. 'You really do have a gift for healing.' He smiled, feeling incredibly grateful yet also slightly embarrassed.

'Don't mention it.' She flashed a quick smile at him that appeared to Harry to be strained.

'Is everything okay?' he asked. This wasn't the first time he'd picked up that all wasn't as well with Julie as she liked to make out.

'Yes' she brightened suddenly. 'It's you and your friends we were all so worried about. When you disappeared like that. We've been looking for the three of you for a week.' Harry sighed and stood up, going back to the kitchen and putting his cup and sandwich on the table before sitting down, Julie joining him.

'I've got to leave as soon as possible,' he said almost to himself 'get back to Hogwarts.' He bit into his sandwich. He knew Ron and Hermione would have taken the cup there.

'Your friends were here yesterday afternoon.' She said, trying to catch his eye. 'That girl, Ginny was with them.' Harry stopped chewing and looked up. 'I don't know why she bothered to come, to be honest.' Julie said 'She didn't look at all concerned about your state of health. Seemed to spend most of her time trying to nosy around my flat.'

Harry frowned but didn't say anything, just resumed eating. When her comment appeared not to get the reaction she expected, Julie pushed further 'You know, if you two are in love, she has a funny way of showing it.'

Harry pushed his chair back and left the table, slipping a clean t-shirt over his head and throwing on his jacket. 'I'll see you round.' He mumbled and headed for the stairs. Julie stepped in front of him, handing him a fresh bottle of purple tonic.

'Take this, and remember, seven drops with water or juice. The state you're in, you'll need to keep taking it until the bottles empty.'

Harry took the bottle, stashing it in his pocket, and then started down the stairs, making it as far as the door before she called out to him again.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

'Harry' she said again, more quietly this time.

He finally looked around at her as she reached the bottom of the stairs. 'You know you can come

here anytime if you need to ... I-I-If you want to.' Harry could see in the bright waiting room the dark rings under her eyes as they glazed with tears. She held something out for Harry, placing it lingeringly in his hand when he turned his palm up. It was an ornate golden key, the same one he had seen her use to unlock the door he was standing before.

'N-no' he said uncomfortably as he tried to hand it back to her. She stepped back and waved his hand away.

'Keep it. You might find you need it.' She was frowning as a tear spilled down her face. Harry turned and opened the door, going through it and closing it behind him, pausing outside it momentarily to shove the key in the same pocket as his tonic before angrily taking a few steps and then disappearing to arrive outside the Hogwarts gates.

What is she playing at? He thought, his temper bubbling just below the surface. What does she want from me? He locked the gates and started walking to the entrance when he veered off and headed to Hagrids. There was no smoke rising from the chimney, even in this cold weather, so Harry didn't hold much hope of finding Hagrid at home, but he knocked briefly and tried the handle automatically, expecting it to be locked, but it opened easily.

He walked into the gloomy room, all the curtains were closed allowing only minimal light. Harry saw something stir out of the corner of his eye, and was surprised to see Socks sitting on Hagrids made bed. He smiled and went to sit down next to her. She was peering at him through her large green eyes, her tail flicking in annoyance by her paws.

'What have you got to be so angry about?' he said as he pulled her to him, entwining his fingers in her fur. 'You've found yourself a nice place to sleep and still have your freedom to run around chasing mice at your leisure. Sounds like a pretty good life to me.' He held her out in front of him, laughing softly as he looked on the grumpiest cat he'd ever seen. 'Anyone would think I was interrupting something. You don't have a Tom cat hidden in here do you?' Harry made a mock search of the room with his eyes and Socks swiped at his face with the paw of a bear for his trouble.

'Whoa... Touchy little thing aren't you? Ah, now I get it,' Harry said quietly 'your mistress has told you to treat me like the git I am, hasn't she?' He was wearing a wry smile, hiding the real pain at the thoughts of Ginny's feelings towards him at the moment.

She had come with Ron and Hermione to see how he was, but according to Julie she didn't look interested in his condition at all, seemingly far more interested in Julie. I guess its natural, he thought. She's probably too mad at him still to want to show anyone she cares. That must be it, he thought. He cuddled Socks to his chest, and despite her apparent grumpiness she began purring loudly.

'You still love me at least' He held her up again 'So what d'ya think, will she ever forgive me?' The cat wriggled free and dropped onto his knees. Socks quickly sunk her claws in, and as Harry jumped up at the prickly pain, she scooted over to the door and disappeared round it. 'Well I guess that answers that question.' Harry left the hut, closing the door behind him, and headed for the entrance.

There was a lot of clatter coming from the Great Hall and Harry figured it was breakfast, and having left the majority of his sandwich back at Julies, he entered the hall and stood at the end of what he thought was the Gryffindor table, ready to sit down, but there was something strange about it.

There were some Gryffindors sitting at it, piling their plates or eating their breakfasts, but there were also Hufflepuffs Ernie and Justin sitting opposite Dean and Seamus, and to their right was Luna, which was not so surprising as she had taken it on herself to sit with Ginny at the Gryffindor table anyway this year, but also Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot, all fellow Ravensclaws sitting chatting comfortably with Lavender and Ginny.

Ginny ... his eyes lingered on her. She was spooning food onto her plate, looking wind swept and beautiful, as if she'd just gotten off her broom after a rigorous game of Quidditch. Harry tore his eyes away finally to see Susan and Hannah laughing at something the Creevey brothers had said. The only one missing who should have been a part of this was Neville. Harry suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore and he turned to leave.

'Oh no you don't!' Hermione and Ron had just entered behind him. They still looked worse for wear after their ordeal, but Hermione was eyeing him determinedly 'You're eating, nothing is going to spoil this.' She nodded at the table.

'What's going on?'

'The DA mate, they're growing, booming in fact.' Ron said as he bounced on his toes. 'Seems when we all went missing for so long people were signing up like mad. Ginny was able to give out the extra coins to keep up, and well, with such a mishmash of houses, they decided it would be better to eat together so they could keep up with the latest news and maybe help figure out what happened to us.'

Harry frowned, feeling utterly lost. 'But how? Why?' he asked.

'Neville.' Hermione said affectionately. Harry turned to look at her. 'He did a lot of campaigning for the recruitment of the DA, seems he had a lot more friends than he ever knew. They did it for him in the end.'

Hermione directed them to three empty places at the end of the table, a little away from everyone else. Harry received a lot of smiles and nods, even a wave or two from the rest of the table when they noticed he was there. Things had changed from being the invisible boy.

'They know Harry.' Hermione said across the table to him.

'Know?' Harry's stomach dropped.

'They know Voldemort had us for the past week.'

'What?' Harry was stunned. 'Who told them?'

'McGonagall did yesterday after we got back.' Ron answered 'Not in front of us of course, Hermione and me were up in the Hospital while Madame Pomphrey shoved the most disgusting potions you've ever tasted down our throats.' He screwed his face up in remembrance.

'Why did McGonagall do that?' Harry still couldn't fathom it.

'Well it's the truth,' Hermione said 'and I guess she feels people deserve to know what's going on. And I agree with her to be perfectly honest.'

Harry thought about it for a minute. He had been so used to keeping everything they did a secret that it was going to take some getting used to if this sort of thing was going to happen often. To take his mind off it he filled his plate and started eating, his appetite returning with the first piece of bacon. During his meal he set about asking how they got him free of the glass tomb.

Apparently they realized pretty quickly that their normal spells weren't going to work, and after seeing Harry try and fail, they panicked as they watched him give up and stop trying. 'I was numb with the cold. I couldn't have moved if I wanted to.' He said impatiently.

It turned out that Ron bolted off to get help while Hermione stayed back and watched Harry die. Tears were swelling in her eyes as she recounted how horrible it was to watch and yet not be able to do anything. She said he must have been lifeless for at least 5 minutes before Moody figured out a way of removing the glass altogether.

It vanished and the water burst out all over them as Harry dropped to the floor. Moody said Harry was gone and nothing could be done but Hermione wouldn't give up. Her muggle first aid training had taught her how to do CPR and since Harry had been immersed in freezing cold water, his brain had a good chance of still being in tact even after almost six minutes without oxygen.

'Something Voldemort would never have considered.' Said Hermione nastily. 'When he made that trap, he made it for great wizards, which in his mind means pure-bloods, he knew whoever went in after the cup would have to die to reach it, and that was where he thought it would end, in your death. He never would have imagined muggles could be so useful.'

'Once again he underestimated something he despises and doesn't understand. Muggleborns!' Ron said cheerily, putting an arm around Hermione's back proudly. She smiled sheepishly and leaned into him.

'That's right.' Hermione said 'Wizards think once someone is dead then there is no bringing them



back.' Harry listened and thought about how Voldemort was being slowly defeated by the things he constantly underestimated. Then he told Ron and Hermione about seeing his mum and dad, how they had helped him, telling them he never would have gotten back with the cup in the first place without them.

'Another loophole he does not understand.' Hermione said as she pointed her fork at Harry. 'Once you cross over, the people who are there and love you can help you.' Harry shook his head.

'Where's the cup?' he asked suddenly.

'Safe' Ron said.

'We'll tell you later.' Hermione motioned to the people nearest them that had started to eaves drop. When they were noticed they turned guiltily back to their food.

'P-Professor McGonagall w-would like to see you b-before lunch.' A small voice came from behind Harry. He looked over his shoulder and little Peter was standing behind him looking extremely nervous. Harry smiled at Peter and ruffled his hair affectionately.

'Thanks, Pete. How are your patronuses coming on?' he asked, genuinely interested.

Pete shrugged, 'Okay, I guess.' but he sounded very down. Harry smiled his best smile.

'How about I do some one on one with you?'

Peter's eyes brightened immediately as he nodded.

'Okay, let me know when you've got some free time and we'll work something out.' Harry said.

Peter seemed speechless and just nodded before moving away and almost walking straight into someone coming up the isle.

'Think you've got a bit of a groupie there, mate.' Ron teased.

'He's a good kid who deserves a break.'

After they finished breakfast Harry went up to crawl into bed, still feeling the strain of the week's events. He took out Julie's tonic and chided himself. She had told him seven drops in water and last time he had only been using five; that was why it didn't seem to be doing the job as well. This time he measured out seven drops and after returning the lid and placing the bottle, along with Julie's front door key in his bedside cabinet draw, he downed the liquid and laid back on his bed, pulling the curtains around to shut out the dark, and closed his eyes. He barely had time to think about what he had to say to the Professor at their meeting before dropping into a deep sleep.

When he woke a couple of hours later it was with a start. Something had come back to him in his dreams and it disturbed him greatly. He had remembered dreaming about floating between the two lights weeks ago when he got back to Hogwarts after Halloween. Only then it had been Ginny's voice that had drawn him back. Would he have been headed for that same sinister red light that sucked you in if she hadn't woken him? The realization sent his head spinning.

When he made his way up to the Headmistresses office, he pondered what she had to say to him. So often he had walked in there and come out completely confounded, having entirely not expected what she, or indeed, who ever else was in the office with her, would have to say. Something told him this time would be no different, especially after recent events. Once outside her doors, he knocked. They flung inwards at the Professors command. 'Enter.'

'You wanted to see me?' Harry walked slowly towards her, mildly surprised there was not a lynch mob laying in wait for him.

'Yes. Sit down, Potter.' Harry slouched in the chair before her desk and waited as the doors thudded closed behind him. She was yet to look at him as she busied herself with paperwork, and then upon standing, she moved around the desk and kept walking until she stood before Dumbledore's portrait. Harry did not look at the painting, too angry about what happened last time he was in here to face the old man. Turning, McGonagall clasped her hands in front of her and peered at Harry shrewdly.

'Where is the cup, Harry?' The Professor's words were the last thing he expected.

'What?' he asked, baffled.

'The Horcrux, Harry,' said a familiar, gentle old voice 'where is it and how do you plan on destroying it?' Harry looked up at the painting of Dumbledore and met his old mentors eyes, acutely aware that every single past Head of the school was now eyeing him with great interest.

## 22. Friend or Foe?

Though Dumbledore's face was kindly, Harry still found his anger was brewing uncontrollably inside him. This man had chosen to ignore him when Harry needed him most, and now that there was something he wanted from Harry, he was demanding an answer.

Harry did not get up from his chair; instead he turned his gaze to the edge of the desk in front of him. 'I don't know where it is.' He said sullenly. His answer was met with silence. After an uncomfortable amount of time, Professor McGonagall spoke.

'You did obtain the cup, did you not?'

'Yes.'

'Then it seems to me, you would know of its whereabouts.'

'You would think so, wouldn't you?' Harry said darkly 'But maybe you hadn't heard, I was unconscious when they took me to Julies, so I have no idea what Ron and Hermione did with it.'

The room erupted.

'Insolence!' One of the paintings remarked huffily. 'No respect!' Said another. 'Typically teenage.' Came the sarcastic drawl of Phinneas Nigellus from the far wall.

'Harry, I understand how you feel,' Dumbledore said, quieting the comments. 'But there-' 'How I feel?' Harry cut in. He lifted himself from the chair and walked slowly towards the painting, glaring at the old man. 'You understand? That's what you've got to say to me after months of waiting? You understand how I feel?' Harry's fury was surging through him, he could feel it gathering momentum, threatening to burst.

'You know what its like to face the darkest wizard of all time, having almost no power of your own, with the fate of everyone you love riding on your shoulders? You know what its like to see the people you get close to, one by one die, just because they are close to you? No... Don't tell me you understand. Don't tell me you know what I'm *feeling*.' His eyes were beginning to swell with angry tears.

'Do you know what I had to do to get that cup? Do you? I died ... Can you believe it?' Harry ignored Professor McGonagall's intake of breath as she brought her hand to her mouth. He shook his head in bafflement, staring at the floor searchingly as if somehow he might find the explanation he was looking for if he looked at it long enough. 'I had to die to get it. I mean... Who would think to set a trap like that? ...' For the first time, the events of the past week started to sink in. Harry's legs began to feel like jelly. 'What sort of person...'

'The worst kind of person, Harry.' Dumbledores eyes watered as he looked down on him. 'And you are right, I do not know what its like to be you. But I do know you. Well enough to believe you will find a way to deal with your pain and get on with the task at hand.' He said 'You are not alone, Harry.'

'YOU LEFT ME!' Harry roared at the two dimensional image. 'I AM ALONE!'

'I had to, Harry.' A tear crept down Dumbledore's cheek as he spoke grimly. 'One day you will come to understand. For now, you must trust in what you know is right.' Dumbledore straightened in his chair and his voice strengthened as he continued. 'The time for hiding is over. Voldemort knows now what you are doing, and he has already set in motion plans to ensure you do not succeed.'

Harry felt like a pallet of bricks had been dropped on him. 'What?'

'He has been aware for sometime that three of the Horcruxes are gone, and of course, he will have discovered you managed to retrieve the cup by now. It must be destroyed as soon as possible, and your search for the unknown Horcrux should begin.'

'How do I destroy it?' Harry asked, forgetting his anger in his need to find an answer.

'Knowing how to destroy it is not so much a problem as living through it. You have already been on

the receiving end of the locket's curse.'

'So what do I do?'

'The same thing you have always done. Your best.' Dumbledore leaned back in his chair wearily.

McGonagall walked to her desk and leaned on her two hands, peering at Harry. 'I would suggest you start looking closer to home for help, Potter.'

'Home?' Harry said.

She nodded and raised her eyebrows 'Hogwarts is the best home some of us have ever known.'

Harry walked to the door, and then turned uncertainly. 'Professor, how did the Order find us? How did they know where we were?' She answered without looking at him; busily sorting paper piles on her desk. 'Let's just say, persistence paid off.'

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Harry went down to the Great Hall to catch the last of lunch after he left the Heads office, picking up a pumpkin juice and taking it with him after he had hurried down chips and lasagne. When he finally caught up with Ron, he was sitting in the common room, sulking. It seemed Zach had been chasing Hermione down ever since she returned, and she could no longer hold him off with excuses and so agreed to meet him.

'What are you so upset about?' Harry said confused. 'She'll call it all off now we have the cup.'

Ron sneered. 'You haven't heard then?'

'Heard what?' He asked, taking a seat opposite him, sipping his juice.

'His Lordship was hounding McGonagall the whole time we were gone, spent every waking hour hanging around, demanding she "produce" Hermione. He was told there were people out looking for us, but he had it in his head she'd eloped with you.'

Harry sprayed pumpkin juice out of his nose. 'What?'

'You heard. So now she's outside trying to convince him that the three of us spent the past week in a dungeon under the church being held by Voldemort.' Ron shook his head. 'I'm telling you Harry, he's going to be trouble when she finally does pluck up the nerve to tell him.'

'Well, maybe we should go down there.' Harry said 'Check and see if she's alright.'

'What, and get our heads chewed off? No thanks. She thinks she can handle him, let her try.'

Harry narrowed his eyes. 'Your dying to go down there and see what's happening.'

'No I'm not.' Ron said unconvincingly. 'And anyway, I was down there and she told me to push off.'

Harry looked at him knowingly 'You were teasing her mercilessly, weren't you?'

'That's not the point, is it?'

Just as Ron was speaking, Hermione clambered through the portrait hole looking rather dishevelled, and spotting them, she headed straight for the stairwell to the girls dormitories. Ron stood up suddenly, calling after her as he walked speedily towards her, but she ignored him and disappeared behind the pillar. In a fit of fury, Ron shot up the stairs, but even as Harry tried to yell out a warning, there was a loud clunking sound and Ron came sliding down feet first on his stomach. Red faced and fuming, he picked himself up as several Slytherin sixth years laughed, and stared up the stairwell as it clunked back into place.

'Next time she goes, we'll follow her, just to make sure.' Harry said, appearing at Ron's shoulder.

He grunted and let Harry guide him back to the chairs.

'Where's the cup?' Harry asked as he leaned forward so they weren't overheard.

'We buried it in the secret passageway that's blocked with rubble.'

Harry nodded. It seemed like as good a place as any since it was not only secret, but also completely useless. 'We have to figure out how to destroy it before we bother retrieving it.' He said.

Ron and Harry spent the rest of the day in the restricted section of the library looking up curse-breaking spells. They compiled a list of the most likely types that were used against the darkest magic, jumping frequently at the sudden and impatient shooshing noises of Madam Pince who hovered and pounced every time Ron's hunger pangs gurgled loudly. Finally Harry folded the piece

of parchment and stuffed it in his pocket before motioning to a relieved looking Ron to head down to the Great Hall.

Saturday nights in the Great Hall were usually a light affair as Students and teachers alike revelled in being in the midst of a weekend off. When Harry and Ron entered, they were beckoned eagerly by Seamus and Colin, who were already tucking into their food, but Harry saw Ginny sitting opposite them one seat from the end of the table and was about to suggest Ron take the seat next to her when Ron sped away from him, the smell of the food being too much for him to resist, and planted himself next to Seamus, the last spot on that side of the bench. He then started piling his plate high with food, oblivious to the position he had just landed Harry in.

So Harry took up the last spot on the end of the bench, Ginny sitting on his right, and grabbed the first thing that was in front of him, spooning the mushy peas onto his plate. He was so engrossed in trying to ignore Ginny's presence that it wasn't until the fifth spoonful that he remembered he hated mushy peas. After collecting a few foodstuffs he did like, he ate in silence, listening to the others as they talked about things that seemed altogether too normal to Harry.

He could feel Ginny's eyes boring into him challengingly as he finished his last potato, his plate still laden with five serving spoons full of thick gooey peas. He looked at the green swamp, knowing full well that Ginny knew he hated it, but defiantly stuck his fork in, watching it ooze off the sides as he brought it to his mouth. It took all his effort to swallow, but he continued to shovel in forkful after forkful, slowing down dramatically the more he ate, until he was halfway through, and that blissful moment finally arrived. The plate vanished and dessert appeared next. Unfortunately, by this time he felt quite as green as the peas he had been eating, so he left the table and headed back to the Common Room, cursing Ron under his breath.

Hermione was sat with a blanket wrapped around her staring into the fire of the otherwise empty Common Room when he emerged through the portrait hole. 'Why didn't you come down to dinner?' He asked, suspecting he already knew the answer. She looked at him briefly before turning back to the fire. 'I wasn't hungry.'

Harry frowned as he approached her, not sure if he had seen what he thought he had. She wiped the edges of the blanket to her cheeks, confirming his suspicions. He rounded her chair and crouched down before her, his stomach sickening even more than it was already.

'Hermione, did he hurt you?' At Harry's words she looked back at the fireplace.

'That depends on who you are talking about. If you mean Zach,' she met Harry's determined gaze 'No, of course not. He's always been such a gentleman, even if he is a little ... over demonstrative. Ron on the other hand' Tears welled in her eyes again. 'Why does he have to be the way he is?'

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he took Hermione's hands in his. 'You know he only says those things because he's mad with jealousy.' Hermione appeared unconvinced as she looked down at her lap. 'And because he's a stupendous git.' He added, still annoyed about the mushy peas. Hermione smiled in spite of herself. 'When you were passed out in the cage, he was frantic, wouldn't shut up for hours trying to get a word out of you.' Harry let her hands go.

'He even told me he might never forgive me for not caring when you were in a bad way.' Unable to meet her in the eye, he said 'and then you go and bring me back from the dead. I owe you debt Hermione... one that I hope I'm never called on to repay.' Hermione opened her mouth, but whatever she had been about to say, she was cut off by the sound of a bunch of rowdy Hufflepuffs as they entered the room.

Harry took out the list he and Ron had made in the library and handed it to her before slumping into the other armchair by the fire. She scanned the list quickly and Harry knew by the look on her face that there wasn't one spell on there that would work. She leaned forward when she saw the frustration on Harry's face. 'Harry, we are going to need help on this one, and I have a fair idea who to ask.'

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The next morning as Harry knocked on the office door in the dungeons, it struck him how he had known what Hermione was going to say the night before. His own thoughts had strayed to Professor Slughorn after he had left McGonagall's office. He was one of the few people who seemed to have a good working knowledge of Horcruxes, though he had always seemed loathed to admit it. Maybe that was the real reason Voldemort wanted to recruit him.

The door opened, rousing Harry from his thoughts.

The Professor was still in his night attire, the same expensive looking green velvet dressing-gown and matching nightcap as when Harry had disturbed him last time this early on a weekend morning.

'Oh' he said, sounding like he would rather have had an enormous angry troll standing at his door than Harry.

'I need to speak to you, Professor.' Harry said 'Can I come in?'

Slughorn peered over his shoulder as if he was being interrupted. 'Well actually, I am rather busy. Perhaps you should come back tomorrow, hmm?' He replied as he closed the door, frowning when it wouldn't shut completely and banging it against Harry's carefully placed foot a couple of times before looking down and realizing what the problem was.

'This cant wait, Professor.' Harry said, leaving his foot where it was. Slughorn sighed and pulled the door open, stepping aside and waving his arm, motioning Harry to enter. 'Very well, if you will not be put off.'

As Harry suspected, the room was empty of people, but just as crowded with Slughorns comfort-collectables, and still overly warm as he remembered it. He waited for Slughorn to close the door before perching himself awkwardly on a tasselled footstool. 'Professor, what do you know about destroying a Horcrux?' Harry saw Slughorn shudder visibly as he stopped abruptly on his way to what was obviously, going by the worn out dent in the cushy upholstery, his favourite chair.

'Not exactly the type of conversation one is used to first thing in the morning.' He replied. Harry could tell by his reaction he was not completely surprised by his question. 'I imagine you have a very good reason for almost putting me in an early grave.'

'Yes sir, I do.'

Slughorn changed direction and sidled over to the table crammed with assorted drinks instead. Harry watched as he poured himself a drink of what looked like firewhiskey with a rather shaky hand.

'I'm hunting down the pieces of Voldemorts soul. But I need to find out what to do with one when I find it.' At the mention of pieces of Voldemorts soul, Slughorn had downed his whiskey in one gulp, only to turn back to the table and pour himself another.

'And why would I have any knowledge about such things?' he said, his back to Harry with his glass full.

'I was with Dumbledore when he went through your memory in the pensieve, sir.' Harry said. Throwing his head back, Slughorn tipped the whiskey down his throat. 'I know it was you who told Voldemort how to create a Horcrux.' The Professor banged the glass down heavily on the table

'I didn't know...' he said quietly. 'I had no idea Riddle was capable of such ... heinous acts.' He was talking to himself, but then seemed to remember Harry was there and turned to look at him. 'I would never have told him how to do it if I thought for one minute that he would use that information to start creating his own.' His double chin was wobbling as his mouth quivered. 'I wasn't to know. He was so well liked by everyone. Top of his grade, charming ... he had so many friends.'

'Friends who are now all Death Eaters.' Harry said. Slughorn pulled back slightly at Harry's words. 'Yes.' He said slowly, seemingly lost in thought. 'I have been avoiding them for more years than I care to remember.' Harry was getting impatient at Slughorns guilty tangents.

'Professor, how do I destroy a Horcrux?'

Slughorn eyed Harry cautiously. Seeing Harry's determination, he closed them briefly, sighing

heavily, and then waddled a short distance before sinking into the chair. 'There is no "one way" to destroy a Horcrux. He could have sealed each of them differently into their vessels, and most probably would have.' He had been staring at the red and green carpet, but now he met Harry's gaze. 'I would have to see it, then maybe I could work out how its been sealed. *Maybe.*' He stressed. 'Where is it?'

Slughorn had guessed far more than Harry was comfortable sharing, but faced with the prospect of trying to figure it out alone, Harry knew he had no choice. 'I'll show you.' He stood up, not entirely sure he was doing the right thing.

'I'd better get dressed.' Said the Professor, heaving himself out of the chair. Twenty minutes later they were standing by the secret entrance.

Harry waited until he was sure the passageway was clear before opening the disused doorway. With his wand lit, Slughorn followed Harry in a short distance until they reached the rubble. Harry knew better than to try summoning the Horcrux. Hermione had told Harry she had found a way of protecting it against such charms, just in case. So he started pulling some of the stones aside. It wasn't long before he was wishing he'd brought Ron or Hermione along. They had hidden it well and Harry was beginning to think he would have to call it off when he noticed a slight distortion of the rocks.

It was almost a shimmer, but not quite. Harry frowned in concentration as he turned his attention on it, running his hand over the rocks slowly. A slight tingling sensation crept into the tips of his fingers. With renewed effort, he pulled away two huge rocks, exposing a glint of gold. Yanking the cup free he turned to Professor Slughorn.

'Let me have a look at it.' He said, holding out his hand expectantly. Harry hesitated as he handed it over. He watched as Slughorn turned it, eyeing it from every direction. 'Yes,' he said slowly, nervously. His eyes were wide in the small light, giving him a slightly sinister look. Then looking up at Harry he handed it back to him. 'Put it back.'

'But aren't you going to tell me how-'

'Its not as easy as that m'boy.' He said, raising his eyebrows. 'I'll need to think about it ... do some research.'

'Oh,' said Harry. He placed the cup back in the small hole and flicked his wand to cover it again.

Slughorn told Harry he would have some answers for him by the next morning as they parted. Harry nodded, noticing the slight glistening of sweat on Slughorn's brow. Harry walked away from the secret passage, making straight for his room, where he pulled out the Marauders map and checked Slughorn's whereabouts. Something about the way he eyed the Horcrux made Harry nervous. But he felt slightly relieved to see the small dot with Slughorn's name over it moving about in his quarters. Harry's relief was short lived however as he began folding the map and briefly, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he caught sight of another dot moving along a corridor on the seventh floor. And then just as suddenly, it was gone. Malfoy!

Ron waltzed into the room. 'How'd it go?' he asked, and then seeing Harry was frowning at the map he peered over his shoulder. 'Whacha lookin' at?'

'Here!' Harry said, shoving the map at Ron. 'Follow me to the seventh floor! And keep an eye out for Malfoy, I'm going to try to head him off.' And with that, Harry bolted out of the room at breakneck speed, Ron in tail, battling to keep up and watch the map at the same time.

Malfoy couldn't have gone into the room of requirement because the dot was heading in the wrong direction. So how had he just disappeared? Harry thought as he emerged from several short cuts on the fourth floor, figuring he had a better chance of catching Malfoy in the corridors. He forced himself to slow down, drawing his wand from his robes and concentrating hard on the space around him, not sure what he was looking for. He had lost Ron in his haste so he was going to have to rely on his wits if he was going to find Draco.

Harry reached the main stairs that climbed to the fifth level, already feeling that his chance had gone, sure that Malfoy had slipped passed him, when he a familiar feeling overcame him. *Protego!* Harry's training with Sir took over as a white beam of light shot towards him from out of nowhere.

It rebounded off Harry, heading back in the direction it had come.

*'Protego!'* Draco's alarm was evident in his voice. He had not expected a reaction. Harry had caught him off guard. Zooming in on the direction it had come from, Harry aimed his wand. *Expelliarmus!* His spell hit the staircase, causing the stone to erupt in a dusty cloud. Two students, who had been watching the exchange from the top of the stairs, ran off up the fifth floor corridor out of sight.

'Where are you?' Harry demanded angrily, his wand darting around looking for a target.

## 23. The Unknown Passage

Harry scanned the area intently, looking for something that would lead him to Draco's whereabouts. Then someone skidded into view at the top of the stairs.

'Is he here?' Ron asked urgently looking down at Harry. 'The kids who just ran past me-'

*'Ron, look out!'* But before he could react to Harry's warning, Ron was hit hard in the shoulder by a stun almost at point blank range that sent him careering backwards into the fifth floor corridor. Draco was fleeing back the way he had come. Harry dropped his wand hand and leapt up the stairs in pursuit.

'MOVE!' He yelled. A small group of three or four students were making their way cautiously towards Ron's still form sprawled near the top of the stairs. They flattened themselves against the wall terrified as Harry raced through them. Then something caught Harry's eye. The corner of a tapestry half way along the passageway depicting two centaurs gazing at a purple flame on a grassy knoll, a mesh of stars stirring above them, gently flapped back into place.

He pelted towards it, flinging the ancient wall-hanging aside and squeezing himself into a narrow opening that was sliding closed. A wave of steamy heat swamped him as the wall shut behind him with an echoed thud, extinguishing the dim ribbon of light that had filtered through, leaving Harry enveloped in darkness.

Harry knew he had made a mistake the second he took a step forward. Instead of hitting a hard surface, his foot plunged into nothingness, and feeling totally disorientated in the utter blackness, Harry teetered for a moment and then lost his balance. He dropped quickly, and then jarringly collided with something, yet he continued to fall, being propelled with gathering momentum along a smooth round, slimy surface. It twisted and turned, grazing Harry's elbows as he went. Then without warning, he left the slippery surface and was airborne briefly before thudding face first onto hard stone.

His head still reeling from dizziness, and his heartbeat racing more than ever, he scrambled to his feet and lit his wand, trying to find something in the stiflingly hot, damp blackness to focus on.

The minute the light splayed along the glistening stone walls, an ear piercing shrill rang out. The pitch was so unbearable that Harry doubled up, hands clenched over his ears, and eyelids pressed tightly together trying to shut out the noise. It was not the sound of the merpeople's song that screamed aboveground; it was a thousand times worse. It seemed not only to attack his eardrums, but pierce his very skin as well, prickling at it with cactus-like spines of painful sound.

Unable to think, Harry curled up against the wall behind him, squirming in an effort to escape the burning sensation that felt like a fine mist of acid on his skin. But as Harry forced his eyes partially open in the foggy wand light, hands still pressed firmly against his ears, expecting to see his clothes morbidly dissolved and melted to his body, astonishingly his jeans appeared whole, untouched. The painful sound pummelling him relentlessly made tiny specks of light dance sickeningly before his eyes.

Then a flash of white-hot heat shot through his chest. His grip on his wand loosened, sending it clattering to the ground. The light dissolved and Harry knew no more.

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'Potter ...' Harry felt a sharp jar in his shoulder. '*Potter!*' Struggling to open his eyes, his head throbbing painfully, Harry's gradual recognition of the cold voice of Draco that intruded on him sent his pulse racing, rousing him fully. But as he urgently tried to lift himself, he found he couldn't move his arms or legs. Wrenching at the binds around his wrists and ankles furiously, he stopped dead as the sole of a shoe pushed against the side of his face with spiteful force, shoving his cheek into the warm wet surface he was lying on.

A cold, contemptuous laugh broke the silence. 'Well, well ... we meet again.' Harry could not see him, but Lucius Malfoy's voice was unmistakable. A wave of fear gripped Harry as his fingers flexed uselessly in search of his wand.

'All but the most dim-witted of NEWT students would have extinguished their wand at the sound of a Screaming Wraith. It appears Severus is right. Harry Potter is not troubled with the petty art of learning. Far too mundane for the "Chosen One"?''

'You shouldn't have followed me here.' Draco said sourly as he leant down, planting his pale face at an odd angle in front of Harry's, his black Death Eater robes draped loosely around him. Lucius increased the pressure of his foot on Harry's head warningly, as he tried to jerk free.

'You're leaving us no choice but to do something about you.' Lucius drawled.

'Get-off-me!' The words came out muffled through distorted lips as Harry seethed in anger. Lucius dug his foot further into Harry's cheekbone. 'I'm-warning-you...'

'What?' Lucius drawled sarcastically 'what is it exactly you plan to do? Since you do not have a wand, nor even a free fist or leg, your limited magical skills, as well as your primitive mudblood tendencies are of no use here. Perhaps you plan to talk incessantly until you manage to bore us to death with your usual drivel?

'Then again, maybe you have something even more delightfully woeful to share with us?' Harry felt a pang in the pit of his stomach as he watched a malicious smile creep across Draco's lips. Lucius continued, 'Though I should warn you, if you're planning on reciting the grim details of your deplorable personal life with Miss Weasley, I may be inclined to lose my patience.'

Draco sniggered as the pang in Harry's stomach swelled into full-blown nausea.

His anger exploded suddenly, and with an all-mighty lunge, Harry wrenched free of Lucius's foot and brought his bound legs crashing into the back of Draco's knees. Draco let out a painful groan as he crumpled to the ground.

Harry shuffled into a wall behind him, coming to a rest, sitting upright with his bound arms tucked behind him. 'If you go near her' he said, his voice sounding strange 'it'll be the last thing you ever do!'

For the first time, Harry could see Lucius as he rounded on him, wearing the same pitch-black robes Draco wore. With his long pale hair and the angle of the strange coloured light that barely shone from Draco's wand casting long shadows across his sleek face, he looked even more sinister than usual.

'You are hardly in a position to threaten anyone,' He said darkly, bringing his wand only inches from Harry's face. It was obvious he was on the verge of cursing Harry into oblivion, but the anger that flooded through Harry over-rode any fear he should be feeling.

'I mean it.' With a piercing, deadly gaze, Harry held Lucius's pale eyes as he spoke slowly and deliberately. 'If you, your son ... or anyone else touches her ... '

Draco had picked himself up off the floor and now rounded on Harry, furiously. 'You wont live long enough to worry about the Weaslette, Potter! One day soon-'

'One day soon,' Lucius cut in coolly, 'you will face the Dark Lord, and you're life will be a living nightmare.'



'Right,' Harry said sarcastically. 'As apposed to the dream come true that it is now?' He was shifting his body slowly, trying to ease it into a position where he could get to his feet. 'You may not know, not being one of Riddle's closest cronies anymore, (Draco looked outraged) but I spent the last week facing him, and yet ... here I am!'

Lucius raised an eyebrow, looking down at Harry malevolently. 'You *escaped* him?' A faint smile edged Lucius's thin lips. Harry had expected the revelation to anger him, possibly even incite fear, but Lucius looked amused. 'Even you cannot possibly be that ludicrously dull. Tell me,' Lucius leaned in uncomfortably close to Harry's face, 'did you ever bother to ask who it was that released you from your bonds? ... No?' He shook his head slowly and drawled 'Oh dear, oh dear! Still, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You cant even find something that is right under your no-'

'Father!' Draco said sharply. He sounded nervous as he watched Lucius with a mixture of fear and warning. Lucius eased himself upright.

'*Lumo Sepia!*' He snapped. His wand instantly glowed in the same eerie light that Draco's gave off. 'You are fortunate the Dark Lord wants you alive,' Lucius bitterness was evident as he sneered down at Harry. 'Though, you will not think so when he comes for you.'

Harry narrowed his eyes at Lucius's smooth grin. Anger pulsated through him as he finally wriggled up the wall into a standing position. 'Next time we meet, I'll wipe that smile off your face!'

Lucius glared at Harry, his knuckles whitening over the grip of his wand as it shook slightly, and through gritted teeth he said 'Oh, I do so look forward to you trying. In the meantime,' Lucius waved the tip of his wand and the ropes slid from Harry 'let's see how you deal with your present state of affairs.'

Lucius's malicious smile disappeared along with the rest of him as the glow from both his and Draco's wands retracted and Harry was plunged into darkness once more.

There was a brief sound of cloaks fluttering in the darkness as Harry imagined Lucius and Draco making their escape ... then nothing.

'Great!' Harry said under his breath. 'Now what?' He stood in black silence, swamped in sticky heat, and concentrated.  
*Accio wand!*

Nothing. A drip echoed somewhere near as Harry squeezed his eyes tightly shut and said aloud '*Accio Wand!*'

Still nothing.

The drip seemed to grow louder in the stifling silence, and then Harry felt something brush past his leg. He stepped back in alarm.

A waft of humid air swept around him, ruffling his hair slightly, triggering a growing unease in the pit of his stomach. Almost unsure if his eyes were open or closed anymore, Harry reached his arms behind him and felt for the wall, planting his hands firmly on the warm slimy surface in an effort to get his bearings.

The waft gently grew into a steady breeze and Harry's heartbeat quickened with the looming certainty that he was not alone. As dreaded confirmation, a fuzzy blue-green glow appeared in the distance. At first, he thought he had imagined it, but as it spread out along the glistening rounded surfaces, it pushed the air ahead of it with a quickening speed, blowing Harry's jacket out around him.

Harry looked down suddenly in the blurry light. Something had curled itself around his leg. 'Socks?' Ginny's cat was staring up at him, her tail flicking wildly as her hair ruffled in the wind. She pressed her head into his shin then sniffed the ground.

There, almost undetectable, lying on the damp stone at Harry's feet was his wand. He bent down

and scooped it up, looking in wonder at Socks as she turned in the direction of the blue-green light, which lit up the surroundings. Following her gaze, he was horrified to see that a huge shadow was visible in the midst of the eerie glow, drifting straight for him with ever increasing speed. The wind rushed at him as Socks scooted across to a small fissure in the stone wall, and disappeared.

Harry glanced back at the encroaching shadow, raising his wand, his mind racing. His hair and clothes blustered about him as he looked around him desperately for a way out. Then Socks reappeared through the wall. She growled at Harry, lifting her paw up and clawing at the air, and then darted back through it. Harry knew she was trying to get him to follow her, yet there was no way he could fit through the narrow gap, but he bolted towards it in an effort to put some distance between him and the shadowy light that was hurtling towards him.

Then quite suddenly, the light died, the wind dropped, and all was silent again.

Harry listened to the sound of his rapid breathing in the blackness as he turned back towards the now non-existent light. This cannot be good, he thought. A tingling sensation crept up his spine and he knew whatever had been within the light was almost upon him. He had to do something, fast! *'Lumo Sepia!'* His wand ignited in the same eerie light that the Malfoy's had given out.

Harry froze at the sight before him.

In the dark light, two monstrous forms loomed barely feet away. They were almost human, but too reptilian in their features to be considered so. One had an elongated snout and hard armoured skin like a crocodile, and the other had spiky scales that fanned out along its back and neck like a prehistoric lizard.

Their bodies were undulating as if fluid-like, glowing fluorescent in the wand light, and both eyed Harry venomously, baring their dripping, silvery teeth.

A viscous hissing sound brought Harry out of his stupor. Socks was standing at his feet, her hackles raised and her tiny pointed teeth bared. She let out a low rumble of warning and advanced on the rippling creatures in what Harry thought was a totally reckless move on her part. They opened their mouths and the same horrible screeching sound he had heard before accosted Harry, making him curl into himself as he tried to shut out the noise and pain, but Socks spat and growled savagely, seemingly unhurt by their wailing.

To Harry's amazement, they started to retreat as she slunk towards them, but then she turned suddenly, pouncing on Harry and pushing on his chest with surprising force, sending him reeling backwards towards the wall.

In shock at her surprise attack, Harry watched as she darted up a small stairwell that had appeared out of nowhere where before all he could see was the tiny fissure. Realizing she had shown him the way out, a way maybe he could see only by the Sepia light, he took off after her, his skin burning and his hands still clenched over his ears, the wraiths in pursuit, following Socks as she leapt up the stairs turning every now and then to let him catch up.

The stairs ended where a tunnel began, and Harry ran on through it, glancing over his shoulder, but the painful sound of the creatures at his back seemed to fade as the air became dryer and cooler, until he could no longer feel his skin burning.

The curved stone walls of the tunnel ended abruptly, leaving only dirt and wood in their wake as it slanted off at an odd angle. Harry didn't dare try switching to a brighter light, even though it was hard going as he tripped and stumbled over what looked like tree roots in the dirt floor. Sock's tail flipped out of sight on occasion, but then Harry would see her again standing in the middle of the tunnel, her eyes glittering in the strange light, waiting for him.

Some way along, the tunnel came to an abrupt end. Socks watched Harry as he came to a stop, flicking her tail impatiently as she prowled round and around on the spot. Harry looked down at her expectantly.

'So, how do we get out?'

She looked up at the tunnel roof above them, and following her gaze, Harry noticed the wood that

was splayed scarce and disorganized in the rest of the roof, seemed to have a much more solid form directly above them. In the inky light Harry could make out what looked like a trap door, only it appeared to have no way of opening it.

Not sure if the wraiths were likely to still be following them, Harry wasted no time in blasting it with a Reducto curse that sent splinters of shrapnel in all directions.

'C'mon then.' Socks immediately jumped into Harry's outstretched arms, and he hoisted her above him. She leapt clear of him and landed with a light thud on the wood above. Pocketing his wand, Harry jumped up and grasped the jagged edges of wood, pulling himself up with difficulty until he was sitting on the edge of the hole.

Looking around him, he could see a huge old wood and iron bed bent up in the middle and lying on its side, the mattress torn and oozing fluffy green feathers. There was an oversized wooden table and chairs, an assortment of traps and hanging cured food, pots and pans and other gear dangling from the roof, and finally a large stone fireplace on the far wall.

Hagrids?

Harry lifted himself to his feet and looked back at the ruin of floor where Hagrids bed used to be. Hagrid had not long had his hut rebuilt after last years fire; Harry didn't relish the thought of telling him he had made a crater in the middle of the floor and destroyed his bed into the bargain. He took out his wand and tried to repair the damage; the bed heaved slightly and groaned as the iron moved reluctantly, but then it merely collapsed in on itself even further. Deciding it was best left to someone more skilled, Harry grabbed Socks and headed to the door, walking out into the cold mid-morning light.

~\*~\*~\*~

'Harry! You're filthy! What happened?'

Harry looked down at his clothes as he buried his fingers in the fur of Sock's neck. He was indeed, filthy. His shoes, which were once white, were coated in black slimy mud, along with the whole back and left hand side of him.

'Is Ron okay?' he asked as he met Hermione's scowl.

Her face dropped. 'Why wouldn't he be?'

'Oh' said Harry.

'Harry, what is going on! Where is Ron, and why wouldn't he be okay?' Hermione was standing on the worn out carpet in the Gryffindor Common Room tapping her foot with her hands on her hips, and a very fiery look in her eyes.

'Hello.'

Harry and Hermione turned to see Ginny strolling over to them. She had a rather blank look on her face as she inspected Harry's state. 'I don't suppose that mud is Peruvian Bugboo-'

But Socks wriggled free of Harry's grip and leapt at Ginny, seemingly greatly pleased to see her mistress. She knocked the books out of Ginny's hands, sending them tumbling to the floor. Harry crouched down with Ginny and helped her gather them up again, leaning in so no one else could hear.

'Ginny, we need to talk.'

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry stood up with an armful of books as Ginny smiled and said pleasantly 'I've always liked a good conversation.' Surprising Harry with her receptiveness.

'Not here though!' Harry said. 'I have to go and check on Ron first, but then we *must* talk.'

'Harry!'

He turned to see Ron coming through the porthole rubbing his shoulder soothingly. 'What happened to you?' he asked grinning as he took in Harry's slimy clothing.

'I'll tell you at lunch. You alright?'

'Yeah. McGonagall wants to see you though. She wasn't looking too happy either when she brought me round. Did you catch up with him?'

'Who?' Hermione said impatiently. She was trying to coax Socks to her, but Socks kept darting out of her reach.

'We'll meet at lunch; I'll fill you in then. Ginny, come on.' He placed her books on a small table and grabbed her hand, pulling her to the door.

'Harry ...' Hermione called out hesitantly. Both he and Ginny turned and looked at her expectantly. 'Oh, er ...' she looked from Harry to Ginny uncertainly 'n-nothing.' She said in frustration, waving at a hand at them dismissively and resuming her pursuit of Socks.

Harry led Ginny into the first empty classroom they came to, closing the door behind him before turning to her gravely.

'He knows Ginny. Voldemort knows.' He said quietly, frowning as Ginny flinched slightly.

'Oh,' Ginny said, then added vaguely 'knows what?'

'About us, of course!' he said sharply.

'Oh!' she said as comprehension dawned 'that's not good is it? How did he find out?' she asked interestedly.

'Malfoy, who else?' Harry said in impatiently, annoyed he didn't seem to be having the impact he thought was warranted. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter how he knows; the point is you are now a target! This is exactly what I didn't want to happen!' He started pacing the floor nervously. 'He'll try to get to you, I know he will! That's what he does!' His insides were swirling with painful guilt as he stopped abruptly, taking hold of Ginny's arms.

'Until the Christmas break, you are not to leave the inside of the castle! Do you understand? And never walk the corridors alone! Always make sure someone is with you!' he let go of her and started pacing the floor again. 'I'll put the DA onto it.' He said to himself as his mind raced. 'I'll make sure there is always at least two of them with you wherever you go.'

'Oh, I don't think she'll like that very much.' Ginny said blandly.

'Who?' Harry snapped.

'Oh ... er ... maybe you should talk about this later? I'm in a bit of a hurry actually.'

'What are you talking about?' Harry stared at her in angry bewilderment, beginning to lose his temper that she appeared not to be taking his worst fears seriously. She watched him dreamily as he grabbed her too tightly by the arms and said in almost a yell 'Ginny, this is important. He knows! He'll come after you! He'll use it to get to me if he can. You have to stay hidden, you have to stay safe!' He was shaking her as the painful lump in his chest made his eyes water.

'I cannot let anything happen to you! Do you understand? I won't let you get hurt! I won't let him take you too! I won't lose you as well! Do you understand me?' He could feel himself losing control as his eyes dropped to her mouth. The pain within him branched out, surging through his whole body as a salty tear threatened to leak behind his glasses. In a fit of desperation, he thrust his lips to hers, looking for a way to shut out the pain. But he pulled away again prematurely and frowned as he searched her face. She looked stunned, confirming what he had felt in her lips. The anguish of it tore through him.

'Oh ... Oh I'm sorry Ginny. I had no right.' He let go of her and backed away. 'I really am sorry ... really I am...' he could feel himself crumbling as he dropped his gaze to the floor. 'More sorry than you can know.' He walked passed her without looking at her and opened the door, tilting his head in

her direction. 'Go straight back to the Common Room. And tell Ron he's to stick to you like glue!'

The guilt that swamped him had Harry so torn up that when he finally reached the Gargoyle; he stood in front of it unable to utter the password. Ginny was now in serious danger, possibly more than anyone else, even himself, and it was all because he couldn't control himself. He should have stayed away from her after he left her at Dumbledore's funeral!

Dumbledore ... someone who was already no more because of Voldemort. Harry tortured himself with the knowledge that he had endangered Ginny recklessly.

'Stupid!' Harry chided himself angrily through clenched teeth. If Voldemort took her, he would not kill her straight away. He would surely use her as bait. What would he do to her in that time? 'Stupid ... stupid idiot!' He said, breathing hard in an effort to reign in his emotions.

'I doubt that's the password.'

Lupin smiled faintly as he stopped before the Gargoyle, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder. He must have seen the excess water in Harry's eyes because his smile faded as he studied Harry intently. 'What is it? What's happened?'

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry sat in the Head's office and spilled everything he knew about Draco Malfoy's whereabouts when he was in the castle. McGonagall and Lupin listened as Harry told them about the secret passage that did not appear on his map, and about Lucius and Draco's presence in the underground drains. McGonagall rested on her elbow with her fingers to her mouth and a pained expression on her face as Harry recited as accurately as he could what Lucius had said, leaving out the part about Ginny, fearing he wouldn't be able to keep his composure if they dwelled on it.

He told them about the Screaming Wraiths, and the tunnel that led to Hagrid's, acutely aware that the paintings were not bothering to hide their interest. The occasional gasp or short disbelieving comment about Death Eaters roaming the castle at their leisure escaped their lips, and when he had finished, Lupin was the first to speak.

'Harry, why didn't you tell us about Draco when you first saw him?' He looked weary as he leant against McGonagall's desk with his hands in his pockets.

'Because I wanted to find out what he was up to.' Harry replied, his eyes on a green, ball-shaped paperweight that sat atop some parchment on the desk.

'Don't you think we might have had a better chance of determining his intentions together?' asked Lupin.

Harry sighed heavily. 'I couldn't tell you because I'm almost certain it had something to do with the task Dumbledore left me.'

'The Horcruxes?'

Harry looked at Lupin in surprise. 'You know?'

'Yes, though I have not known for long. I am not privy to all of the information. Professor McGonagall and Aberforth are the only ones who know almost as much about this as you do. And it must stay that way. Voldemort could still get information from anyone else if he should happen upon us.'

'We must seal the secret passageway, immediately!' McGonagall said briskly. 'And Hagrid's hut will need to be investigated. I can see how they have utilized the drains, but how on earth they have been getting into the grounds escapes me!'

'What about the fireplace?' Harry said.

'It's a definite possibility. They must have built the tunnel between Hagrid's and the drains. It was just dirt and wood, you say?' Harry nodded at Lupin. 'Then it makes sense that they were able to get in and out of the grounds through the fireplace, and were using the tunnel to enter the castle.'

He added gravely.

'I never heard of such a thing!' one of the most pompous looking of the portraits said huffily. 'I thought Hogwarts was supposed to have superior security.' As the old ex-headmaster pounded his fist on his armchair for emphasis, a few portraits murmured in agreement.

'It always did when Albus was here.' Professor McGonagall looked pale, the news of the infiltration obviously weighing heavily on her. 'I am certain that if he were still running things the castle would have been safe, as it is-'

'As it is...'

Harry and the others looked at Dumbledore's portrait at the sound of his voice. He was peering over his half-moon spectacles at Professor McGonagall. 'Their secret has been successfully discovered before they had time to do any real damage.'

'But do we know that, Albus?' McGonagall stood up and approached him questioningly. 'We're not even sure what they were doing here in the first place.'

'I think it is safe to assume that if they had managed to complete their mission, we would know.' He glanced at Harry and gave him the slightest wink before turning his attention on Lupin. 'I trust you know what to do?' Lupin nodded. 'By the way, now would be the ideal time to tell Harry why you are here, Remus.'

'Yes, of course. Harry, you will be joining Molly and Arthur Weasley at the burrow for Christmas again. Members of the Order will be here on Saturday to escort yourself, Ron and Ginny onto the Knight Bus, staying with you to ensure your safety. Molly has also informed me that you are most welcome to bring someone along, if you wish.'

'Well, I should be going.' Lupin moved to the door and opened it, and then turning he said to McGonagall 'I shall have the passage entrance and Hagrid's Hut guarded until something more permanent can be worked out. Harry,' he said with a nod of his head 'I shall see you at Christmas.' Then he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

'What did he mean,' Harry asked nobody in particular 'I could bring someone along?'

'I am certain you can think of someone who deserves a Weasley family Christmas, Harry.' McGonagall said as she took his elbow and led him to the door. Harry thought he saw a faint twinkle in her eye. 'In the meantime, how is it working out with Professor Slughorn?'

Harry frowned, uncertain of how she knew he had approached him, but looking over her shoulder at Dumbledore, he wondered no more. Dumbledore nodded slightly.

'He said he'd have some information for me tomorrow morning.'  
'Very well. I must get on.' The Professor opened the door and edged him out of her office. 'It seems we now have a traitor in our midst, on top of everything else.'

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'A *traitor*? Ron breathed. 'Why does she say that?' He was sitting next to Hermione at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall scooping cauliflower and cheese onto his plate. The ceiling above them was heavy with grey cloud as the magic rain tumbled down above them.

'Isn't it obvious Ron?' Hermione poked her zucchini absentmindedly. 'McGonagall would have left the rebuilding of Hagrid's hut to people she thought she could trust. Whoever made that tunnel and bewitched the fireplace so it could be used, must have worked on it.'

'I'm betting they won't try to use it again.' Harry said looking at his plate of food with disinterest. 'Well good! Means we don't have to worry about Malfoy sneaking around the place.' Ron stabbed at his Yorkshire pudding and stuffed it into his mouth. 'Chunior or shenior!'

'Hermione, have you done Screaming Wraiths in your defence classes?' Lucius's comment about him not bothering to learn had been playing on Harry's mind.

'Well ... not really,' she eyed him knowingly. 'I mean, they're in the text books, but we haven't really covered it in class.'

'What do you know about them?'

'They're ghosts aren't they?' Ron frowned.

'Wraiths are visible spirits Ron; ghosts are different. A wraith isn't just an echo of a past life; it has substance as well as form. It can affect its surroundings, touch things, move them.' She looked at Harry pointedly 'What did they look like?'

As Harry described them, Hermione's expression darkened. 'They're his Harry. They're Voldemort's.' 'What d'you mean?'

'Wraiths become whatever was in there hearts when they lived. Going by your description, and the fact that they didn't seem to bother Lucius or Draco, I'd say they were put there by Lord Voldemort.'

'To guard the passage' Ron finished.

'Maybe.' Hermione sounded unconvinced. 'They might be there to guard something else too.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know.' she said thoughtfully.

'Tell me about Lumo Sepia.' Harry asked, wanting to know everything he could.

'It means "Dark Light" or more commonly "Black Light."' She said, finally putting her fork down. 'Screaming Wraiths are sensitive to normal light. As soon as they are exposed to it they, well ... scream.'

'It wasn't like any scream I've ever heard before.' Harry said.

'Their screams alone aren't deadly, though people have been known to be driven mad when exposed to them for too long.'

'What? So they can't hurt you as long as you don't use light on them?' Ron said dubiously.

'Of course they can. They used screaming as a weapon on Harry, even in the black light, and they do things, remember? And they apparently have teeth.' She said flashed an uncomfortable look at Harry.

'How come they were afraid of Socks?' he asked, glad to finally see his untouched plate vanish.

'It not just Socks, cats are their natural enemy.'

'Hey, do you think the cups still safe where it is?' Ron whispered.

'They don't know where it is, if they did, they would have taken it by now. If they're even after it.' Hermione said, looking up as Ginny appeared over Ron's shoulder.

'Harry, I need to speak with you.' She looked slightly paler than usual and Harry could tell there was something wrong. He left the Great Hall, following her out into the courtyard. It was very cold and raining heavily still, and neither of them were wearing coats, so they took what shelter they could under a giant willow.

'I want to talk to you about what happened earlier.' Her green eyes fixed on him as he brushed a hand through his hair in an effort to shake some of the droplets of rain off. 'There were some things I should have said, but didn't.'

'No Ginny.' Harry shook his head slightly. 'You don't need to do this. It's okay, I understand.' His heart pounded in his chest painfully.

'I don't think you do.' She said, a small crease forming between her eyebrows. 'I will not live in fear and hiding Harry, and I'm certainly not going to be surrounded by the DA everywhere I go.'

Harry stared at her for a moment. He had thought she was going to talk about what happened when he kissed her. He had thought she was going to explain why she had not kissed him back, why her lips had lacked the fiery passion they always held. He had hoped she might open up to him, even yell and scream at him for his betrayal, or maybe tell him she hadn't meant to be so cold, finally finding it in her heart to forgive him. But she had not even noticed.

The pain and hurt that was flooding every part of him began to change, anger once again rearing its head as he spoke. 'I know things are different between us now, Ginny. *I* know it and *you* know it, but Voldemort doesn't. I'm not changing my mind, you need protecting no matter how *inconvenient* it is for you.' He turned away from her and stalked back towards the door. Suddenly, he was yanked around by an abrupt pull on his arm.

'*Harry Potter*, I've got something to say and you had better listen!' They were both standing in the pouring rain; any shelter now well out of reach. Ginny's hair, which was only lightly dusted with raindrops moments ago, was quickly getting soaked flat to her head as droplets of rain tumbled off the ends of her soft fringe and crept down her face.

'I will not be dictated to! I don't care who you think you are!' Her voice sounded strange as she poked him in the chest. 'I will not be followed around or told where I can and cannot go! Have you got that straight? You are not the only one around here who is entitled to do as you darn well please!'

Ginny's cheeks were flushed, and if it wasn't for the rain, Harry was certain he would have been able to see tears spilling from her swollen eyes.

'Do you really think I would be stupid enough to flaunt who I am now that Voldemort knows about me? Is that what you think? Well it's about time someone pushed you off that bloody throne you've been sitting on *Mr.-Chosen-One* and brought you back down to earth where the rest of us live! You think you're the only one that knows anything that's going on! You think you're the only one who can do anything about it! Well I don't want to be the one to burst your bubble, but there are-'

But Ginny never got a chance to tell him what there was. Harry swept her into his arms and bent down to taste the fire that once again flared after it had lain dormant at their last meeting. She pushed her fists into his shoulders, trying to pull away, but Harry would not release her. Seconds later, he did not need to. Her lips were ignited and she kissed him heatedly, putting her arms around the back of his neck and pulling him to her. Harry was lost for one blissful moment where there was nothing except Ginny.

Slowly becoming aware that they was standing out in the freezing cold and pouring rain, Harry slowed his kiss until Ginny's lips left his reluctantly.

She allowed Harry to take her by the hand, and following him at a run, they headed back inside. They walked without speaking until they reached the Common Room, and then Ginny made her way to the dormitory stairs, leaving Harry to ponder how he had ever thought her lips cold.

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The next morning on his way to breakfast, Harry came across Hunter at the foot of the marble staircase. He was lingering with a small group of students and appeared to be demonstrating the effects of a very nasty curse to the sniggering delight of his audience.

'You've never seen someone perform such a pitiful improvement charm on themselves until you've seen Taphet's effort!' Hunter gloated. 'Imagine trying to make yourself taller and ending up with too much skin! Honestly! It was hanging off him in great wrinkly folds! He looked like my aunt Begonia's dog! And I thought *that* was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen!' The small crowd guffawed as a very red-faced young boy with curly brown hair tried to get passed them unnoticed.

'Hey Taphet!' Hunter yelled after Peter. 'Taphet! I could hook you up with my Aunt's dog if you're looking for a mate!'

'Hunter!' Harry slapped his hand down heavily on Hunter's shoulder. Obviously taken by surprise, Hunter glanced up at him in dire disbelief. 'You must have thoroughly enjoyed cleaning out the Greenhouses last time Hermione set you to it.' Hunter grimaced as the other students stared, unsure of what they should do.



'You know, I could think of far better ways of spending my last week of lunchtimes before the holidays, but each to his own I guess. And don't worry; there'll be no shortage of dragon dung to scrape off the floors, that's always guaranteed! Oh, and its mating season for the Mandrakes if I'm not mistaken. I'm certain you will find it very entertaining picking up after the wild parties they are sure to have thrown over the weekend.' Harry smiled pleasantly as he looked down at Hunters increasing scowl. 'Report to Greenhouse three at the beginning of lunch. I will let Professor Sprout know she can expect you.' Harry started walking away but turned again calling after him 'Oh, and I'd stay out of reach of the Venomous Tentaculars too ... very nasty.'

The group dispersed and Harry entered the Great Hall, making his way over to Peter who was sitting alone at the far end of the Hufflepuff table.

'Hello! Listen, I've been thinking,' Harry sat himself down on the edge of the seat and lazily grabbed a piece of toast from one of the racks 'I promised you some one on one time, but I don't think I'm going to be able to do it before schools out,' Peter, who had smiled nervously at Harry when he sat down, tried to hide his obvious disappointment.

'It doesn't matter. I'm rubbish at magic anyway. I'd probably just be wasting your time.' The boy said sincerely.

'Oh,' Harry said brightly, 'then it is just as well I was going to ask you if you would come and stay with some friends and me over Christmas then, isn't it? Sounds like you could use the practice!'

'But ... under age wizards aren't allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts.' Peter said, with a hint of excitement.

'That will *not* be a problem where we're going.' Harry said casually as he bit down on his toast 'So, what do you say? Wanna come?'

When Harry got back to the Gryffindor table, he was feeling very pleased with himself. Peter had accepted the offer of Christmas at the Weasleys, and assured Harry he would be ready to go with them on Saturday. And the thought of Hunter elbow deep in droppings instead of enjoying his lunch this afternoon brought an immensely satisfying grin to his face.

Harry was just about to start loading his plate, his appetite fully returned, when Hermione swooped in on him, the look on her face nothing short of horrified.

*'Harry! The cup ... its gone!'*

## **24. The Order's Secret and the Lion's cub**

As he ran up the stairs and through the corridors, Hermione at his heels, Harry thought desperately that she had just missed it somehow. He, himself had found the cup difficult to find when he had been showing it to Slughorn, and since he was the last person to have it, it was perfectly plausible that she wouldn't be able to find it. Harry had sensed its whereabouts last time, and would again; he just needed to get there. Yet even as he told himself this, dread flooded him.

Ron was standing outside the passageway when they arrived with a pained expression on his face. Without a word, Harry drew his wand, lit it, and sped into the open entrance, jogging the short distance to the rubble. Rocks were spread on the floor of the passageway where Ron and Hermione had scattered them in their desperate search, and as Harry made his way through them, Hermione came up behind him, panting.

'Its not here, Harry! We looked ... its gone!'

'Bring your light over here!' he ordered as he extinguished his and slid the wand into his jean pocket. She edged her way over the debris as Harry began running his hands gently over the stone. 'What are doing?'

'Sh! I'm trying to see if I can feel it.'

Hermione watched him silently as he traced the outline of the rocks. At one stage he thought he could feel something creeping into the tips of his fingers, but after he heaved a few stones aside, the sensation was gone. It wasn't long before the dread that sat like a knot in his stomach, twisted into anger and frustration, and with a heated growl he turned.

*'Slughorn!'*

He pushed past Hermione and made his way quickly back into the corridor, his anger at Slughorn's betrayal seething within him.

'Where are you going?' Ron asked as Harry emerged and stalked off.

'I'm going to kill him!' Harry said viciously over his shoulder.

'Harry!' Hermione was stepping quickly behind him in an effort to keep up with his angry strides.

'Do you really think he would steal the cup?' she questioned.

'Yeah,' said Ron, as he too caught up after having sealed the passage. 'It's more likely the Malfoy's took off with it, isn't it?'

'You didn't see the look on Slughorn's face when I showed it to him!' Harry said through clenched teeth. 'I knew he was up to something. He's the reason I was checking the map in the first place yesterday! I can't believe I was stupid enough to show him where it was!'

When he reached the door to Slughorn's office, he pounded his fist on it and turned the handle immediately, not waiting for an answer, but the door wouldn't open. Harry drew his wand and pointed it at the lock.

'Harry! It's a teacher's private quarters! You can't just unlock it-' But Hermione's warning was interrupted by a frustrated growl as Harry pushed on the door after having tried to unlock it magically, and it still wouldn't budge.

Harry took a couple of steps back and pointed his wand at the door.

'What are doing?' she squeaked.

Hermione gasped and Ron swore as the door suddenly exploded, sending shrapnel flying into the air and showering the three of them with splinters of wood.

'Geez Harry!' Ron gawped in a half laugh as Harry strode the few steps into the Potions Masters office, inspecting the room before him.

Nothing was out of place; the room was exactly as it was when Harry had been there the morning before, except of course, for the pieces of Slughorn's door which now littered the area in front of the trio, and ... a pair of shiny black shoes on the floor, which pointed to the ceiling as they jutted out from behind the comfortable chintz sofa that backed onto the Professor's sleeping quarters. Harry walked hesitantly towards them, stopping when he rounded the couch.

Slughorn was lying on his back, eyes wide open and his mouth gaping as if quite literally frozen in fear. Harry's anger ebbed as he crouched down over the still form. Reaching out, he gently peeled the chubby fingers from the golden cup clasped to the Professor's rounded stomach.

'Go and get McGonagall,' he said gravely as Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Tell her he's still alive, but needs a hospital.' Hermione retreated immediately. Harry lifted the cup and turned it over in his hands. A large crack ran from the lip to the base.

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Days later they were still trying to piece together what had happened, but whatever his motives one thing was clear; Slughorn had destroyed the Horcrux. McGonagall had shipped him off to St Mungos and Harry made a point of asking everyday for news, but there was no change in his condition.

'I'm glad it wasn't you, Harry.' Hermione had said on more than one occasion, and maybe because Harry wasn't angry with Slughorn anymore, he didn't share her view. It was his fault that Slughorn had the cup, and guilt prickled at him that he had somehow managed to get out of destroying it unscathed.

'He deserved what he got, if you ask me,' said Ron 'He shouldn't have told Riddle how to make a Horcrux in the first place!'

'Tom would've found out some other way.' Harry commented.

With only four days until the Christmas break, Harry called a meeting of the D.A. He decided the

Room of Requirement was still the best place, so the trio sent word out, and before the afternoon was out, everyone who was enlisted had been informed. After dinner, Harry headed up to the seventh floor with Ron and Hermione in tow. He rounded the corridor with the expectation that maybe a dozen people would be waiting for them, and was somewhat taken-a-back by what lay in wait.

There were the old D.A. members milling around beneath the tapestry of the dancing trolls, which included Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie, Justin, Hannah and Anthony Goldstein, Michael, Susan, Terry Boot, Luna and Ginny, yet there was also two Ravenclaw seventh years, Neil Sanders and Lucinda Kellynack, standing with a girl Harry had met briefly last year and whose name he couldn't remember but her parents owned a string of apothecaries, a small gaggle of sixth and seventh year Hufflepuff girls who were giggling and whispering while shooting looks at Harry, and lastly, Blaise Zabini, who was eyeing Harry challengingly as he stood with two other sixth year Slytherins Harry had only ever had dealings with when dishing out punishments.

'What are they doing here?' Ron asked under his breath.

'They asked about the D.A., so I gave them the details of the meeting.' Hermione said matter-of-factly.

'Zabini' Harry said in cautious greeting as he stopped outside the already materialized door. Zabini merely motioned his head in return. Everyone cleared the way for Harry to open the door, and then filed in after him. He waited until they were all seated on one of the many cushions spread throughout the room, and the door was secured behind them, before speaking.

'Hogwarts is not safe.' He started gravely 'Death Eaters have been roaming around beneath us the whole time we've been here.' Gasps rang out, and eyes boggled out of their gaping faces, but no one spoke; they sat with their wide-eyes glued to Harry as he continued. 'It's time for us to mobilize. We need to pool our resources and help McGonagall keep an eye on the castle. It'll be our job to be on the look out for anything ... or anyone that shouldn't be here. Hermione,' he said, turning to her, 'can you make out a roster for people to check the passageways between classes?'

'I'll need everyone's timetables when we get back to the Common Room.' She said tentatively. 'I can have something worked out by morning.'

'Good, and it'll need to include the grounds as well.' he turned back to the rest of the room. 'Myself, Ron and Hermione will continue to do the night shifts; the rest of you can cover the days.' Harry look out at the anxious faces before him. 'We'll have to start conducting regular meetings, so I'm suggesting we start with another one on the first school night when we get back from Holidays, same time and place. Between now and the break, if you see or hear anything suspicious, report it to one of the three of us immediately.'

'Does this have something to do with that night you saw Malfoy?' Seamus asked.

'Yes, it does.'

For the rest of the meeting, Harry was bombarded with questions about Draco and his father's activities. He wasn't able to tell them much as he had no idea himself what they were doing, which only seemed to unnerve everyone all the more, and as Harry described the screaming wraiths that lurked beneath them, there was much head-turning and whispered murmuring.

More to make them feel like they could do something to help protect themselves than actually thinking it was necessary, Harry advised them to learn the Lumo Sepia charm and to find out everything they could about the wraiths in the unlikely event they should find themselves face to face with one. Before he dismissed the meeting, Harry asked Dean, Seamus, Ernie and Justin to stay behind. They hung back as the rest slowly trickled out the door, all except Zabini who approached Harry once most of the crowd had gone.

'What would Death Eaters be doing at Hogwarts?' He had asked it without any trace of scepticism, and was watching Harry intently.

'We don't know.' Harry replied shortly, not at all sure he should be comfortable having Zabini in on their dealings. Zabini looked away thoughtfully and muttered something under his breath that he knew they had been up to something before turning back to Harry and added 'Whatever our differences, I don't like what's happening anymore than you. I've got plans of my own when I leave Hogwarts, and things going the way they are, is ... less than ideal for me. I'm not promising anything, but I'll put some feelers out and see what I can reel in.' He turned, and Harry watched his

back as he left the room.

'What did he want?' Ron asked as Hermione and the others gathered round.

'I don't know, but he might prove useful.' Harry said grimly. 'Anyway, I called on you, because I can trust you not to say anything,' he looked around at their expectant faces, 'especially to Ginny. She's in trouble, more trouble than she knows, and it's up to us to keep an eye on her. I want someone on her every waking hour until school's out. Hermione, you'll get her timetable with all the others tonight. I want you to work out the rosters so that not only are the passages and corridors covered, but Ginny as well.' Hermione gave him a worried look.

'I don't mean to sound difficult,' Dean interjected, 'but she isn't going like that one bit!'

'That's why it has to be done carefully. She doesn't have to know she's being followed if we plan it right.'

'Why does she need following?' Ernie piped up with a bemused look on his face. 'She doesn't come across as the "damsel in distress" type to me.'

Harry breathed out heavily; he hadn't wanted to have to explain. 'Voldemort has been told Ginny and I were together.'

'But that's history isn't it? I mean, you broke up, right?' asked Justin. Harry stared at the floor.

'Yeah, but he doesn't know that. He'll try and get to her if he can.' He hated saying it out loud; the guilt twisted in him painfully.

'I'll work it out,' Hermione said, watching him. 'I'm sure between the seven of us we can keep her covered.'

'Don't worry,' Dean said solemnly, 'if it's that important, we won't let her out of our sight.'

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The last few days of school went quickly as the weather cooled and the snow began to fall once more, and by the time Saturday morning rolled around, Harry was beginning to feel nervous about leaving Hogwarts. He knew McGonagall was working with The Order and the Ministry to ensure the castle's safety, but once he and the others left for The Burrow, The Order would be concentrating on keeping the place where "Harry Potter" was spending Christmas safe. McGonagall had told him the Ministry would be placing live-in Ministry Guards over the holidays, and that she and several of the staff would be remaining, she also informed him that Hagrid was returning in a few days, all of which helped stave off some of his fears.

Tonks, Sturgis and Hestia were standing in the snow waiting for them just inside the gates, all of them rubbed up to the eye balls and beating their hands against the cold as Harry and the others strolled out into the grey day. After a rather intimidated and shy Peter was introduced, they shuffled through the gates as other students passed them accompanied by nervous looking parents. They waved a hasty goodbye to Hermione, who was apparating out; not at all happy her parents had insisted she go home for the holidays. She was holding out that they would let her go a week early, allowing her to join Harry and Ron at The Burrow eventually.

Tonks took charge of Peter's luggage, morphing her features to do a convincing impression of Professor Flitwick giving nervous instructions on the levitating charm on Peter's trunk whilst pretending to duck for cover and finally toppling off the stack of books he was always mounted on. The young boy took to her immediately.

'Why aren't we apparating?' Ron said as he helped Tonks to her feet as she resumed her usual appearance.

'We are!' she said. 'The Knight Bus is going to be full. It seems most people feel it's the fastest and safest way to travel under the circumstances, and it's not a good idea for us to endanger the other passengers.' She shot Harry an apologetic look.

'I-I-I can't a-apparate...' came a small voice near Harry's elbow.

'I'll take you,' Tonks said brightly, 'someone else can bring your trunk.' Peter flushed as she instructed him to grab her arm tightly, and a few suffocating seconds later, they were all at The Burrow.

Harry had a shock as Mrs. Weasley rushed out the front door, waving her arms madly and singing greetings at the top of her voice. She looked much thinner than she had done even at the beginning of school term, and there were dark shadows under her tear stained eyes. She grabbed each of them in turn, pulling them to her and squeezing so tightly her fingers went white.

Harry felt slightly nauseas as he watched her almost lift Ginny off the ground. He didn't relish her reaction when he told her about the danger her daughter was now in because of him, and the guilt weighed heavily on his chest. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to rush into, but he knew both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had a right to know.

'Oh!' she said as she wiped at her damp cheeks, 'You're finally here!' sounding almost as if she couldn't believe it. Then she launched into another round of hugs before stopping in front of Peter. 'And you must be Harry's young guest!' Harry had sent one of school owls with a note earlier in the week to let Mrs. Weasley know Peter was coming, certain that even though he had told Ron, he wouldn't have passed on the information. She put her arm over Peter's shoulder and drew him to her. 'Well, you just treat this as your home while you're here! C'mon, lets get inside in the warmth.'

They all bustled up the cleared path through the snow and once inside, they separated off to unpack. Harry took his trunk up to Fred and George's old room, while Peter was set up in the Den. After meeting downstairs again for a deliciously warming lunch of Mrs. Weasley's homemade vegetable soup and fresh crusty bread, they retired to the lounge in front of the fire while Mrs. Weasley quizzed them on the happenings at Hogwarts.

It was obvious as Ron told her about the tunnel under the grounds that she hadn't heard about it, and she tried quite unsuccessfully to hide her growing fear and anger by laughing loudly at the most unfunny things they said. After a long while, she rose and headed for the kitchen.

'Arthur Weasley, you wait until you get home!' Harry overheard as she disappeared through the doorway. The clashing of pots and pans being slammed on benches in angry abuse could be heard as Ron leaned in sheepishly.

'I wouldn't have told her if I thought she didn't know. Dad should have warned me!'

Peter had been shifting uncomfortably in his chair the whole time they had been discussing Hogwarts, and Harry noticed his face was somewhat paler than usual.

'Well it's not a problem anymore.' He said, motioning slightly to Peter. 'The tunnel has been discovered, so Hogwarts is safe again.'

'Of course,' Ron chimed in, picking up on Harry's hint and glancing sideways at Peter. 'Professor McGonagall's on top of it.'

Ginny sat silently by the fire, the golden light of the flames flickering on her hair. Although Harry couldn't see her face, he could tell by the way her shoulders sat that she was tense. Maybe with the thoughts of how close Voldemort's Death Eaters had come, it had finally hit home how much danger she was in. Maybe now she would drop her tough exterior and accept the protection afforded her.

Maybe she would not to return to Hogwarts at all.

Harry stood up and left the room, heading for the back door. It was late afternoon and already the sun had retreated, leaving a billowy grey blanket of snow under the starless sky. He wandered across the backyard, crunching crusted snow underfoot, picturing Ginny's face, as it must have been in front of the fire. He looked around, but could not see any Order members, yet he knew they were there; hidden in shadow, or disguised by magic. The sound of boots in the snow coming up behind him made him turn.

'I suppose you feel like you're never alone.' Ginny said as she watched her feet's progress in the icy mounds. She pulled up along side his shoulder without looking at him. 'I brought you a coat,' she held out a thick jacket. 'You'll catch your ...' She had been going to say death. '... It's freezing out here.' She wrapped her arms about her as Harry donned the warm fleece.

In the pale light, he caught a glimpse of something, and without thinking, he reached up to her neck and trailed the chain in his hand until it fell on the pendant that nestled between her collarbones. It was the pendant he had given her when he had left to find the locket, except instead of a badly tarnished and blackened wheel, it glittered silver in the sparse light. Now that it was

clean, markings could be seen on the five spokes.

'I cleaned it.' She said quietly. Harry nodded before letting it fall back to her bare skin. 'I've worn it since that day you gave it to me ... never taken it off.'

They stood alone, awkward silence reining, Ginny scuffing her boots lightly in the snow, and Harry watching her. He knew she was there for a reason, something other than delivering a coat. He waited. Then finally she looked up.

'Don't tell mum and dad about us ... don't tell them Voldemort knows.' she said it nervously, unable to meet his steady gaze, as if knowing his thoughts. Harry continued to silently watch her. 'They'll stop me from going back.' Her eyes had been roaming the ground, but now she turned them on him. 'I want to go back, Harry. I need to go back.' If telltale fear hadn't shown in her eyes, it would have been easy to think her angry the way her brow furrowed under her fiery fringe. She searched Harry's face for a reaction, but received none.

'If-If it makes any difference, I'll do as you asked. I'll stay within the castle walls, I won't go out ... not even into the grounds unless it's safe.' Her speech was coming faster than normal as she reached up and lightly grabbed the front of his coat. 'You can put the D.A. on me ... I won't complain about them following me everywhere ... I'll even make it my responsibility that they're always with me!' There was a look of hopelessness behind her watery eyes as she pleaded 'Harry, please ... don't tell them what's going on ... don't make me have to stay! I have to go back with you when you go!'

She brought her mouth to his in a desperate kiss, her sudden determination taking Harry by surprise. The painful feelings that had been burning in him; a melting pot of guilt and anguish, were doused by the touch of her lips, and he kissed her back with all of the passion that she aroused in him. And for a moment, it seemed like everything was going to be okay.

She had finally shown him that she wanted him too; needed him as he did her. She had thrust herself on him when he had remained stiff with resolve ... and yet ... she had made no mention of forgiveness. She had not actually said that she wanted him, only that she wanted to return to Hogwarts. With a terrible unwillingness to let his thoughts interrupt, the realization slowly sank in. She wanted something from him. Harry grabbed her arms and pulled her away.

Breathing heavily, he asked 'What do you want from me, Ginny?' She stared at him with glistening cheeks in the grey light.

'I want you to tell me that you won't say anything to mum and dad ... Promise me!'

He stepped back, unconsciously increasing distance between them and swallowing the lumpy pain in his throat.

'I can't do that.' He said grimly. She had kissed him to get around him. To manipulate him. Harry removed the coat and dropped it at her feet before turning and walking the harsh path back to the unwelcome warmth.

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When Christmas day arrived, Harry rose late, as had become his habit since he found it painful to be in Ginny's company. He had not yet told Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about their history together, or the threat that now hung over her, but everyday he reminded himself he would most probably tell them tomorrow.

He was not feeling at all in the Christmas spirit when he entered the kitchen to find Mrs. Weasley basting the biggest turkey he had ever laid eyes on. She had pots galore boiling away on the stovetop and knives chopping carrots and green beans on the benches noisily. Harry sat down wondering where everyone else was, at least until she started huffing over getting the impossibly large turkey back in the oven, (which Harry was certain had already been magically enlarged for the occasion) and finally sensing why no one else was in sight and not wanting to be on the receiving end of her frustration either, Harry decided to skip breakfast and rose from the table quickly before she noticed him, and headed for the lounge.

As he suspected, the rest of the household, including Mr. Weasley, Bill and Fleur were spread around the furniture in front of the fire, and upon his entrance, they looked up anxiously, but seeing it was Harry, not Mrs. Weasley, relief flooded their faces and they went back to either staring off into space, or chatting to the person next to them. Ginny was busily putting up Christmas decorations, gradually turning the room into a spangled forest of tinsel, but Fred and George were yet to show, and Charlie, Harry had been told, was not making the trip across.

As the morning drew on to afternoon, other people began arriving, and it wasn't long before Harry understood why Mrs. Weasley had needed such an enormous bird. Not only had Lupin and Tonks shown up, but several other Order members as well. Apparently they were taking it in shifts; while some would be inside enjoying a Christmas dinner, others were outside on guard until it was their turn. When Fred and George made their entrance, they greeted Harry heartily before offering to help Mrs. Weasley with the food. She shoed them out heatedly after they managed to turn a second pot of asparagus on its head "accidentally".

'Alright, Potter?' Moody growled as he made his way to Harry and Ron.

'Yeah, you?'

'Can't complain, no one to listen to me anyway! I heard about the tunnel at Hogwarts, wasn't able to be there myself, but Lupin tells me its under control now.' His magical eye was scanning the room, and appeared to be lingering in the direction of the kitchen. 'Don't suppose you've got any idea what they were doing there?'

'No'

'Strange things are happening all over now.' Moody said gruffly. 'Some say they're just random occurrences, purely coincidence. Bollocks, I say. They're all little pieces of a bigger picture if you ask me, we just got to find a way of stickin 'em together.'

'Mad eye!' interrupted Hestia indulgently. She had obviously been listening, 'you can't possibly still think that poor boys missing body has anything to with *his* plans.'

'I do, and if it isn't then why can't the Ministry find him, eh? Oh ... excuse me, Molly's needin my help.' Harry had been about to ask what body, but Moody melded into the crowd just as Lupin emerged. He handed Harry and Ron and eggnog each.

'He's right about the strange happenings, though.' Hestia continued, 'If the whole Quintaped thing at Halloween wasn't bad enough, all sorts of stories have come out of it since that just don't make any sense.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' Ron said to Lupin, 'I never got a chance to thank you for saving Hermione and me. Wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for you!' he lifted his eggnog in a toasting gesture. 'You know, with all the life debts I'm chalking up, I'm beginning to think I would be better off dead.'

'What are talking about?' Lupin took a sip of his eggnog.

'Halloween!' Ron said 'When the Death Eaters had Hermione and me cornered. If you hadn't come along when you did I wouldn't like to think-'

'I didn't.' Lupin said with a frown. 'We found the two of you fast asleep after the Death Eaters retreated. I thought you knew.'

'Well who hit Amycus and Avery then?' Harry asked, his heartbeat unconsciously increasing. Lupin shook his head slowly.

'There were no passed out Death Eaters near you when we got there,' he addressed Ron, 'just the two of you slumped in a doorway.'

'Are you sure no one from The Order did it?' Harry asked slowly.

'Absolutely certain! Everyone was accounted for. Maybe you just thought you saw a couple of Death Eaters, wouldn't be surprising, the state you were in.' he said to Ron.

'What? Its not possible to both hallucinate the same thing ... is it?' Ron scoffed.

'What about this missing body then?' Harry pushed, an uncomfortable pounding now growing in his chest.

'Who told you about that?' Lupin asked gravely. Hestia gave him an apologetic look before slinking into the crowd. 'This is not really the time to be discussing such matters, its Christmas Day, Harry.'

'What body?' Harry said in a way that indicated he was not going to let the subject drop. Something

about Lupin's reaction told him Lupin was keeping it from him for a reason. Lupin sighed deeply and turned his eyes to the floor for a moment, before settling on Harry again.

'Two days after he was killed, Neville's body disappeared.'

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Harry felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Lupin hastily took Harry's drink from his tightening grip, shoving their cups into nearby idle hands and edging Harry backwards into a chair.

'Are you all right?'

'Wh-what do you ... h-how could h-he...' The words wouldn't come.

'Harry.'

But he could barely hear Lupin; he had managed to bury Neville's death deep within him, smothering it quickly whenever it threatened to surface, but now the tiny lump that he had suppressed for so long was expanding rapidly, filling him with the wretched feelings he had numbed. Harry dropped his head forward as his eyes closed tightly trying to contain the pain and rage that spread through him.

'Harry?' Lupin's tentative voice coaxed, 'I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to find out, not this way.'

Harry did not lift his head as he spoke, his voice thick with anger. 'How did it happen?'

Lupin crouched on the edge of the chair next to him. 'He was taken to the family crypt the evening after he died and sealed within a tomb.' Lupin sighed heavily as he shifted uncomfortably. 'His grandmother discovered what was left of the broken stone the following morning.'

Harry was sickened to his core. 'Why would they take him? Hadn't he paid enough?' He said in ghastly bewilderment. 'What could they possibly gain?'

It was then Harry realized the whole room was silently watching them. Ron's face was bloodless as he stared dumbfounded at Harry while the twins were glaring at Mr. Weasley.

'I can't answer that.' Lupin said, running a weary hand through his hair. 'I wish I could.'

Harry couldn't bear to sit there any longer; he pushed himself to his feet and made his way through the parting crowd. He had no idea where he was going, but found himself outside a few seconds later ... walking, making dents in the downtrodden snow, his eyes stinging as the salty water chilled in the biting cold. He slowed when he reached the garden shed, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, turning this way and that, not knowing what to do with himself.

Why hadn't Lupin told him? Maybe it would have been easier ... maybe he would have been able to do something ... Maybe he wouldn't have felt like his insides were slowly decaying.

Who would do that to Neville? What could they possibly gain from desecrating him? Why couldn't Neville rest in peace ... *he should be at peace!* As his rage became unbearable, Harry's fist flew at the wall of the shed; the weathered wood caved and shattered as his hand disappeared beyond his wrist.

A small whimper came from inside followed by a low shooshing sound.

Harry drew his wand and put his hand to the rusty latch, yanking the stubborn door open. Sitting on a wooden crate beneath the small window were two shadowy figures, one smaller than the other. Harry squinted as he tried to adjust his eyes to the dim light.

'Are you going to stand there pointing that thing at us, or are you coming in?'

Harry lowered his wand at the sound of the cool female voice. He moved away from the door slowly, allowing the light to penetrate the darkness where Ginny sat. She had her arm around Peter's shoulders, frowning intently at Harry as the curly haired boy wiped quickly at damp cheeks.

'You know, most people just knock.' She said with a hint of impatience. Harry was keenly aware he had interrupted an awkward moment, and though he instinctively wanted to ask what was going on; why Peter was so upset, the boy's obvious embarrassment stayed his tongue; instead he sat down



on a rickety chair opposite.

'Sorry...' Peter said in a small voice. Harry leaned forward on his elbows.

'Don't be. There are things *worth* crying over Peter.' The small boy nodded and stood up, wiping his hands down his jeans.

'I-I think I'll go back inside now.' He said to Ginny as she got to her feet. She smiled warmly and nodded her head, and Peter walked out of the door, disappearing behind the wall. Ginny waited until the sound of crunching snow faded before speaking.

'He knew Neville.' She said gravely. 'He overheard Lupin telling you.'

Harry ran his fingers through his hair. 'I didn't know.' He slouched back on the chair, eyeing the blood that was slowly beginning to ooze from his scratched and battered knuckles. 'Its not right,' he said as dark red trails ran down his hand. 'Why does it have to be the innocent people who suffer? Neville ... even Pete's been through more than any kid his age should have to go through.'

'I can think of another eleven year old who'd been through as much, if not more.'

Harry continued to stare at the ruby streaks. 'It's different,' he said 'Peter is so ... young.'

'So were you.'

The sudden softness of her voice sent an unbidden surge of yearning through Harry. He was beginning to feel wearied by the emotions that were tearing through him; too much anger and pain pulsed beneath his dormant exterior as he watched the blood creep down between his fingers and drip to the floor. He was tired of this war. Tired of fighting. Yet as he sat there, he knew he could not turn his back on it. Exhausted by sorrow he watched the tiny peppered spots on the floor as they merged. He needed to purge himself of the poisonous hurt.

Bleed it out.

'Thanks for not saying anything to mum and dad. I don't think they'd have let me go back if they knew.' Then almost as an after thought, Ginny added 'You're not going to tell them ... are you?'

'No, I'm not going to tell them,' Harry said grimly, 'but you are.'

Ginny did not answer at first, and he could tell by the sound of her breathing she was restraining herself with obvious difficulty. Harry still did not look up; instead he watched the small pool of blood at his feet slowly expand.

'I can't.' Her voice trembled slightly.

Harry stared at the sticky reddish-black liquid darkly 'It must be important if you're willing to continue to deceive and manipulate to go back.' He finally dragged himself away from the bloods morbid progress, grabbing Ginny's wrist sharply as her determined hand headed for his face. Without releasing it, he drew himself to his feet.

'How dare you!' she said heatedly.

'How?' Harry said roughly, his own anger ignited. 'Because only days ago you tried it on me, and it nearly worked! You almost had me thinking...' He stopped himself as his heart beat painfully in his chest.

'What?' Ginny said, the anger gone from her voice. 'Thinking what?' Harry let go of her wrist and dropped his gaze, his breathing shaking with uncertainty. He suddenly felt as though he was standing in quicksand. Right now he was in it up to his neck, and he was almost certain whatever move he made, he would sink completely. 'Harry ... what were you thinking?'

'I thought ...' he hesitated.

'What?'

'I thought that you might have ... forgiven me.'

A horrible silence filled the room as he waited for her to say something, and as it stretched on, Harry began to sense the awful truth.

'No, Harry.' She shook her head slightly. 'I haven't quite managed to forgive you, though I have

tried.' Harry closed his eyes briefly.

'At least we don't have to pretend anymore.' Ginny said flatly.

Harry could feel his heart being squeezed dry. 'We haven't needed to pretend for a long time now.' He said grimly.

'You're wrong. I *have* been pretending, but I don't want to anymore.' Her eyes betrayed her steady voice, pooling with water as she stared at him.

'Harry, don't you know the effect you have on me?' Ginny took a step closer to him. 'When you walk into the room, every nerve in my body sparks, and every time you leave, you take those tiny pieces of beautiful light with you. When you're hurting ... its like ... like I can't breathe until you smile again. Your touch is all I ever needed, yet you turn me away time and time again.' She was visibly shaking yet there was no anger in her voice. 'And I thought I knew why ... I thought I understood you ... and then...' her eyes dropped to the floor 'then you made love to Julie.'

'It wasn't love.' Harry said quickly, 'I-I don't know what it was ... or-or why I did it...' he felt the quicksand swamping him, suffocating him. He had to make things right. 'I-I never wanted to hurt you. If I could take it back, I would.'

'She's had more of you than you were ever willing to give me...'

'No ... no, that's not true,' Harry took hold of her arms, desperate to make her understand. She pushed his hands off and stepped back, her head dropping as she brought the back of her hand to her mouth.

'I hate thinking about it, but I can't stop myself! I see you with her ... the two of you together' she sank down onto the edge of the crate, staring at nothing in front of her 'I think about how it must have felt to you ... touching her ... her hands on you ...' her brow furrowed, 'and I start to feel like I'm drowning with it.'

Harry could feel a hot droplet of guilt and anguish creeping down his cheek as he watched her. He wanted to go to her, take her in his arms and hold her until she was healed, but his guilt held him back. 'I don't know how I can make things right ... tell me how...'

Ginny looked up at him through sorrowful eyes, her voice much calmer now as she spoke. 'I don't know if it can be made right.'

'You can't forgive me.' he breathed in realization.

She pushed herself to her feet and approached him. 'No, Harry ... I can't forgive you,' she touched her hand to his cheek 'but I'll *never* stop loving you.'

She raised her head and brushed her mouth against his. At her words, the quicksand rapidly retreated; she had told him she loved him.

Harry closed his eyes to her kiss, gently caressing her soft lips as he breathed in her scent, immersing himself in the sweet sensation of her touch. The need in him grew as he increased the pressure of his lips on hers. He wanted to drink her in, fill himself with her. She had said she loved him...

When she slowly pulled away from him, her lips were full and reddened from his want. 'Maybe its something I'll learn to live with, I don't know.' She fixed Harry with her green eyes. 'What I do know is I don't want to go on pretending. I don't want another day without you.'

He bent his head and kissed her again, not wanting to let her end it. Her mouth was so tender and warm as she offered it to him, and he delicately played his lips across hers, lost in the passion that burned within. It was the kiss that he had craved when he slept alone at night; when his deepest desires would surface, and he lingered his lips as if in hope it would never fade. Harry traced his hands along the contours of her body longingly as she slid her arms inside his jacket and un-tucked his shirt to lay her hands against his bare skin. The feel of it sent ripples of pleasure through him, and he gave himself over to the love he had for her, burying his guilt, knowing he would never hurt her again.

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Ginny had found the strength to tell Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about Harry and the threat she now lived under with Harry's encouragement, knowing it was the right thing to do, and Harry had insisted they do it together now they were no longer hiding their feelings for each other. The afternoon after the awful disquiet of Christmas Day, Harry and Ginny approached Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Ron had taken Peter out into the back garden to practice hexes, giving them the space they needed, and no one else was expected to turn up, so they asked Ginny's parents into the lounge room, both of them feeling very nervous.

As Ginny explained how she and Harry had realized their feelings for each other last year, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had exchanged glances, and when she began stumbling towards their break up at the end of the year, Harry took her hand, squeezing it as he brushed his thumb over her skin in an effort to comfort her, and took over. The look on their faces as he told them about his connection to Voldemort, and how that put Ginny's life in danger, almost made him wish he hadn't been so determined to tell them. When Harry finished, the Weasleys sat in silence, side by side on the couch, staring at Ginny.

'So,' Mr. Weasley said hesitantly, 'there was a prophecy?'

'Yes.' Harry renewed his hold on Ginny's hand.

'And that's why he's after you?'

'Partly.' Harry had not told them the prophecy word for word, but he could see Mr. Weasley's mind ticking over, putting everything together. A very alarmed looking Mrs. Weasley clasped her husband's hand in hers tightly, her knuckles turning white.

'And Ginny,' he said slowly 'he knows you have feelings for her?'

'Yes.' Harry watched as Mr. Weasley lifted his head slightly, swallowing his raw emotions, and turning his gaze on his daughter. Ginny had hardly moved, hardly even breathed as she listened. Harry could feel her fingernails digging into the flesh on his hand. Mr. Weasley dropped his eyes to the floor.

'Under any other circumstances, I'd be glad that my daughter chose someone such as yourself. You are a fine young man, and I know I could trust you to treat her well,' A gaping black hole was stirring in Harry. He had expected this, and even worse, he agreed with it. 'But I think the best thing for both of you right now is to do what ever it takes to stay safe. We'll keep a closer eye on the house until you go back to school Harry, and then we'll leave men here to watch Ginny and Molly after that. I'll try and be here as often as I can...' but he trailed off as his eyes fell on Ginny again.

'No, no...' her words were barely audible as she shook her head lightly, 'No ... I'm going back ... I'm not staying...' Harry let go of her hand, placing it on her shoulder.

'Your dad's right, Gin.'

'No Harry! Why isn't anyone listening to me? I'm going back to Hogwarts, its no more dangerous than staying here!' Mrs. Weasley rose and came towards her. 'Mum, please... if I go back, with all of the increased security, I'll be fine! It makes sense that I'd be better off there!'

'You're mother will want you here with her, Ginny.' Mr. Weasley said 'Surely you can understand that?'

'I-I do, I know why you want me to stay,' She was looking from one to the other 'Please, just trust me on this; I know what I'm talking about. Hogwarts is the safest place for me ... Mum?' she pleaded 'Please...' Mrs. Weasley, who had not spoken at all yet, turned her intent expression on Arthur.

'Well, I can see only one-way out of this.' She said. 'I'll go with them when they return. I'm sure Minerva will be able to find some empty quarters for me to stay in. I'll be at Hogwarts as an Order member after all, not just a mother.' There was a sudden interruption as someone cleared their throat.

Harry and the other three turned in the direction of the kitchen. Standing in the doorway was probably the last person Harry had expected would turn up.

'Hello mother.' Percy said gravely. Mrs. Weasley let out a strangled gasp, clutching at her chest, but she did not rush to embrace him. Mr. Weasley also stood his ground.

'I didn't mean to interrupt; Sturgis told me to ... the front door was open.' he gestured awkwardly. 'What can we do for you?' Even as Mr. Weasley said it, Harry could tell he was extremely uncomfortable with having to be so formal. It seemed necessary though. The last time Percy had appeared at their door, he had come not for his family, but to give the Minister his opportunity to get to Harry.

'I want to see Harry, actually.' He said stiffly, 'Though, he's not the sole reason I am here.' He still had that pompous air about him, but Harry also thought he looked rather weary. 'I doubt whether Harry has anything much to say that would be of any use to you, or the Ministry.' Mr. Weasley said.

'Well, yes ... of course Harry's an adult now.' Said Percy, glancing in Harry's direction. 'Therefore I would imagine that decision is up to him.' Mrs. Weasley placed herself in front of her husband, facing him.

'He's right Arthur. Come with me and I'll put the kettle on, you too Ginny.' She grabbed her hand and led her passed Percy. She looked back at Harry questioningly as Mr. Weasley turned to him.

'I'll stay if you want.'

'Its fine.' Harry said. Mr. Weasley only gave Percy the briefest of glances as he made his way to the kitchen.

'Well,' said Percy briskly 'that went as expected.'

'What are you doing here Percy? Still Scrimgeour's right-hand man?'

Percy tilted his head. 'It might surprise you to learn that I was reassigned.'

'Not really, people like you always seem to do well at the Ministry.' Harry stated unkindly. Percy's eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second before he moved into the room.

'I said reassigned, not promoted, though I see you still harbour a certain amount of resentment towards us, even though the Minister has respected your wishes and not interfered.'

Harry kept his tone flat. 'From what I understand, he didn't have much of a choice after his henchman almost killed me.'

'Yes, yes well that was a most regrettable situation.'

'Regrettable? See, now I wouldn't have put it like that. Catastrophic seems rather more fitting.'

Percy tensed as he gestured to a nearby chair. 'Why don't we sit down?'

'No, I don't think so. Why don't you just get to the reason you're here?'

'Very well,' Percy said huffily, and then he leaned in and said slowly and succinctly. 'I came here to inform you that you can now consider the Ministry as a "safe house" if you should need it.' Percy raised his eyebrows and nodded, looking very pleased with himself. Harry stared at Percy in silence for a moment.

'What?' He finally said, unable to stop an incredulous smile from hitting his lips.

'It is common knowledge that Lord Voldemort is pursuing you,' Percy said pointedly. Harry frowned slightly at Percy's use of the name, but he continued conspiratorially 'and should you ever need it, the Ministry is the place to go.' Percy gave Harry a half-wink as if intimating some other meaning only the two of them could share in, and Harry let out a small laugh, much to Percy's obvious annoyance.

'Right. So let me just get this straight.' Harry said pleasantly. 'You came all the way out here to your parents home, whom you no longer even talk to, to tell me - the person the Minister himself almost had killed a few months ago, that I should go running to the very place I was left to die, in the event Voldemort pops round. Is that about right?'

'Well' said Percy defensively, 'When you put it like that it sounds almost comical, but-'

'Comical?' Harry scoffed 'It's completely ludicrous. Why would I return there for safety after everything your Minister has done to *help* me in the past?'

'Look, I know you've had your difficulties with the Ministry, but not everything is always about you!'

Percy said heatedly, his cool persona evaporating. 'I've been working on this too, if you must know, and something you should remember is the Ministry has the money and the resources to do things you can not.'

Harry sighed, 'Voldemort won't be defeated with red tape and paper shuffling by a bunch of bureaucrats.' Harry said, all traces of amusement gone from his voice. 'He's the most powerful dark wizard that ever lived, or haven't you heard?'

Percy's chest was heaving angrily as he spoke. 'I had hoped you would have grown up enough to understand. I see I was wrong. You are still as stubborn as you always were!' He pulled something from out of his robes and thrust it into Harry's hands. '*Listen* to the people who are trying to talk to you, Harry. And remember, not everything is about *you*.' Then he turned and stalked out of the room.

As the front door slammed shut, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried into the room, Ginny, Ron and Peter trailing after them.

'What happened?' Mr. Weasley asked. Harry turned his gaze to the small, yet heavy clay container in his hand. As he lifted it so he could inspect it, he saw a small hinge running along a crack, he turned the pot, and spying a small brass latch, he opened it.

A tiny seedling was nestled in the rich, dark soil filling the container.

## 25. The Power Of One

Everyone had examined the seedling Percy had passed Harry with a certain amount of trepidation, even Order members who were continually coming and going looked it over, but no one could identify it so it was placed out in the shed, a good distance from where it could do any harm.

Ginny took to watering it everyday and positioning it into the scarce sunlight as it moved about throughout the day in the dim surroundings, hoping that it would grow enough for them to understand what it was. Harry accompanied her more often than not, as much to get some time alone together as to make sure it was no threat to her.

Hermione arrived at the Burrow a week before they were to return to Hogwarts, and Ginny immediately led her out to take a look at the seedling which had sprouted an extra tiny leaf or two whilst she had been nurturing it. But Hermione was at a loss to explain its foliage as much as anyone else, pointing out that it would need to be somewhat bigger before they could positively identify it.

When Harry and Ron finally and reluctantly took her up to Harry's room and filled her in about the disappearance of Neville's body, she had turned a sickly pale colour and didn't speak for some time. Ron moved to sit beside her on Harry's bed, putting an arm around her in an effort to comfort her but she seemed closed to him, as if lost in thought. Maybe the news was too much for her to swallow, although Harry learned from Ginny that she was still receiving owls from Zach everyday, even though he was no longer under the effects of the potion. He suspected her mood had something to do with that as well as the news about Neville.

One thing that did seem to cheer Hermione was seeing Harry and Ginny together again. She learned quickly however, to knock before she entered either Ginny's or Harry's room after one particularly awkward moment where she walked in on them to find them locked together in a passionate embrace as they laid across Ginny's bed.

Being faced with two flushed, yet rather amused looks staring back at her, Hermione turned scarlet and retreated rapidly, closing the door with an apologetic grin.

Whether it was the fact that Harry and Ginny seemed to be spending a lot of their spare time together, leaving Ron and Hermione to themselves, or if Ron was feeling somewhat threatened over Hermione's situation with Zach, they too seemed to be spending a lot of time together.

For months Harry had seen their subtle, and not so subtle beginnings of a relationship forming, and now it seemed that left to themselves, they hardly ever argued anymore. Harry caught them on occasion wistfully watching one another when they thought the other wasn't looking, Harry bringing his hand to his mouth in an attempt to hide his inability to resist smirking. He and Ginny were also often exchanging amused looks as Ron became more attentive to Hermione, uncharacteristically thinking to hand her serving dishes of food at meal times and frequently offering to pour her tea or juice.

The obvious change in Ron's manners did not go unnoticed by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley either. At first, Mrs. Weasley had fretted over Ron's considerate attitude and had even gone so far as to place her hand to his forehead, possibly to see if he was fevered and delirious, but it didn't take her long to figure out what was going on and as the days passed, she took to flashing secretive smiles to her husband at Ron's not so successful attempts at the oh-so casual gestures.

Harry could tell Hermione was trying to contain her pleasure at the way things were developing, and for once he felt completely happy for them, no longer burdened with how it would effect their friendship. He himself was feeling happier than he could remember in a long time, now that things were out in the open for him and Ginny, and she was Ron's little sister! If Ron and Hermione did finally want to recognize their feelings for each other, who was he to stand in their way?

Perhaps remembering what it was like to be young and in love, Ron's parents often retired to bed much earlier than usual, leaving the four of them sitting by the fire at night as Peter trailed off after them, worn out from his Defence sessions he was having daily with Harry. Once or twice Harry had actually injured him slightly, even though he was only using simple jinxes and hexes against him. Harry had consciously tried to restrain his skills after the first time he bruised the boy, but it was almost as if his powers were increasing unwittingly.

But sitting by the fire after dinner was Harry's favourite time of day. He would lounge on the couch and freely encase Ginny in his arms as she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder while Ron and Hermione would take the two-seater divan. Every night was the same. They would sit, one at either end of the sofa, and then casually start shifting their bodies until they touched, eventually resting against one another.

The four of them talked about everything and nothing, immersing themselves in the tranquillity of their company, letting go of everything that plagued them during the day for those few hours at night, knowing, yet not wanting to acknowledge it would come to an end all too soon.

Harry's health had improved in leaps and bounds during his stay at The Burrow.

Mrs. Weasley's home cooking and the peace he rediscovered in Ginny once again had helped to ease his mind, and he continued to take the tonic Julie had given him each night before he slipped into bed. Socks often joined him later in the night, yet was always gone by morning. On occasion he would see her lurking out in the yard during the day when he was training with Peter, or Ron and Hermione, disappearing through the hedges, most probably on the hunt for mice or other cat treats.

Harry spent much of his time outside practicing new spells; some that Aberforth had taught him, and other's that Hermione had dug up.

At first he tried to teach Ron and Hermione a spell called the "Circumcaesura Abrogare", which was similar to the shield charm, except the duration of the spell lasted longer and protected the caster not only against curses and hexes, but also against other substances that might be in the atmosphere. It was extremely advanced magic, and very powerful when cast, taking a lot of concentration, and could prove very useful, though it had one major drawback; once it was in action, the caster would not be able to cast spells out through the protective bubble either; unfortunately working as a shield both ways.

Ron and Hermione found it impossible to cast it on their first session after trying for almost an hour, so they moved onto something else which Hermione had plucked from her *Inconceivable Magic: Spells Beyond The Ridiculous* book she had picked up at Flourish and Blot's at the beginning of the year. Needless to say, it was also extremely difficult magic. The spell was called the "Accendere Abaqua" charm and it created fire on water.

Hermione melted a pool of snow for them to practice on, managing spectacularly to master it on just her third try; though she had always been particularly adept at creating fire with magic. Harry had eight goes at casting it before he produced a whiff of smoke that fizzled pathetically on the water and faded into nothing, but not one to give up, on his eleventh attempt a purple flame erupted on the reflective pool, looking almost as impressive as Hermione's had. Ron, on the other hand, even after over a dozen goes at it, couldn't seem to make anything happen at all. In fact, the melted pool of snow was starting to freeze over again by the time he eventually gave up in disgust.

So they moved onto some of the advanced hexes and curses in Hermione's book, deciding to practice on gnomes because they were not game to try them out on each other. Most of them had extremely unpleasant effects that would prove difficult, if not impossible to reverse without the skills of a talented wizard or healer. They worked out a plan. While two of them would flush out a gnome, the other would cast the spell.

Right about now they should have been feeling rather sorry for the poor little gnomes being used in such a way, but fortunately for the gnomes, and not the trio, they didn't have a lot to worry about in the end. They cast spell after spell on the unsuspecting, potatoes with legs, with very little to show for it.

One unlucky gnome limped off carrying its newly detached leg after one of Ron's efforts, and another had to drag its head along the ground awkwardly as it made its escape since it weighed rather a lot having swelled to five times its normal size. Hermione watched it retreat, lowering her wand guiltily as Harry stepped up for the next go.

Ron snatched up an unsuspecting, and stupidly nosy gnome by its leg as it came out of its hole to see what all the fuss was about and waited for the nod from Harry before dropping it to the ground. As it got to its feet angrily, brushing itself off and turning to stalk back to the bushes, Harry fired at it. Instantly the gnome was squelched flat.

Harry stepped back stunned as Hermione let out a whimper and Ron screwed his face up, 'Yecchh!'

'That-that wasn't suppose to happen!' Harry said, still eyeing the squishy mess. 'It was supposed to just pin it to the ground! Not flatten it.'

'The poor thing,' Hermione said with a mixture of repulsion and pity.

'But, I didn't mean it,' Harry said guiltily. 'It was supposed to drop to the ground and be pinned there, like under a heavy weight.'

'Well, it looks like an invisible anvil dropped on it,' Ron said with a raised eyebrow.

'But it's not supposed to kill it!' Harry said persistently as he walked up to it.

'Maybe it's because the gnome is so small?' Hermione said, still staring at it bleakly.

'No!' Harry said in frustration. 'The spell isn't meant to be that powerful! ... I didn't want to kill it...' he trailed off.

'Well ... I think that's enough for today,' Hermione said tentatively to Harry. 'We'll try it again tomorrow.'

'Yeah, I'm hungry anyway,' Ron said briskly.

Hermione and Harry looked at him in disbelief.

'How could you be hungry after that?' Hermione motioned to the sickly gooey blob where the gnome had once stood.

'Well I'm not going to eat that am I?' he said as if it were self-explanatory.

~\*~\*~\*~

The next afternoon Harry decided to do some training with Peter instead of working on new spells. He enjoyed his time with Pete and hoped it would take his mind off the unfortunate gnome incident from the day before.

The boy was a keen student and practiced very hard to perfect the spells Harry tried to teach him. He led Peter to the backyard and decided to work on his shield charm, starting with something he

knew the boy could throw off, thinking he could gradually increase the strength of his jinxes as they went. Peter readied himself and Harry fired off a mild hex, expecting it to bounce right off him, but the spell broke through. The boy's wand hand jerked suddenly and Peter let out a sudden yelp of pain as he dropped to his knees, clutching at his arm.

Harry rushed to him and pulled back the heavy sleeve of his jacket and was mortified to see that the boy's wand hand, right up to the elbow was blistered and raw. He quickly led Peter back towards the house as Mrs. Weasley came rushing out looking alarmed.

As Mrs. Weasley flustered about, wrapping an arm over Peter's shoulder protectively, Harry explained numbly that he had only cast a stinging hex while Peter's shield was up. Once inside, Mrs. Weasley busied herself, digging out one of her healing books and whipping up an ointment, coating Peter's wounds with it and then bandaging the area before shuffling the boy into the kitchen instructing him to help himself to some freshly made hot chocolate.

When Peter was out of earshot, she turned back to Harry.  
'You threw a stinging hex at him?' she asked cautiously.

Harry knew Mrs. Weasley had been very taken with Peter over the time he had been there, and Peter too, seemed to reciprocate the feelings; spending much of his time helping her in the kitchen and generally hanging around her as she fussed over him.

'Yes,' Harry said quietly.

'And he was ready for it? His shield was up?'

'Of course it was!' Harry said defensively. 'I wouldn't have cast it otherwise.'

Mrs. Weasley eyed him for a moment and the side of her mouth curled slightly. 'Well dear, it wasn't your fault then, was it?' She said finally. 'Maybe his shield charm isn't very strong.'

Harry shook his head as he dropped his eyes to the floor. 'No ... no, that's not it.' He met her gaze uneasily. 'I've been working on Protego with him since the Defence classes at Hogwarts and he withstood the same hex then.'

His eyes searched the floor at his feet again. 'It's not him' he paused as the squashed gnome came back into his mind 'its me.'

Harry turned and left as Ron's mum bit her lip, not knowing what to say. As he walked through the door and down the stone steps to the front yard, Hermione called to him, coming from the side of the house pulling her heavy quilted jacket about her against the frosty chill, Ginny in tow.

'I placed a quick-growing charm on the seedling in the shed.' She said as she approached. 'I imagine we will have a fair idea as to what the plant is not long after we get back to Hogwarts.'

'Good' Harry said distractedly 'good.'

'What?' Ginny said flatly as she brought herself alongside Hermione, immediately picking up on his mood. Harry looked at the both of them hesitantly.

'I was thinking I might go back to Sirius's.' Ginny eyed him suspiciously as Hermione frowned.  
'We've only got a few days until we head back to school and there's a few things I need to ... take care of.'

'What things?' Ginny said bluntly. Harry looked around the yard as he scuffed his foot in the powdery snow.

'I've been ignoring a lot of stuff over the holidays because ... because I wanted a rest from it all. I wanted to just ... let it all go for a while and be with my friends.' The people I care about, was what he had wanted to say. He steadied himself as he finally addressed them face-to-face. 'But I need time alone for a while.'

~\*~\*~\*~



When Harry entered number twelve Grimmauld Place, he floated his trunk up the stairs and set Hedwig's cage on the dresser, opening the latch so she could stretch her wings. He sat on the edge of the bed, slumping his shoulders and closing his eyes, rubbing at them under his glasses.

*What was happening to him?*

He already knew from his battle in Hogsmeade that his stunning curse was gaining in strength, having seen the trouble fully grown and powerful wizards had had keeping their feet when deflecting it. When it *had* contacted its intended target, they had been flung through the air with surprising force. He had killed a grumpy little gnome that didn't deserve to be squashed flat, and now he had hurt Peter, a kid who he liked immensely, with no explanation as to how it had happened. Was he becoming dangerous in his ruthless attempts at increasing his skills?

What if he had cast something worse at Peter? The thought sickened him. How am I going to continue training with Ron and Hermione? He thought. What if I hurt them as well? He knew Mrs. Weasley had told them what had happened with Peter because when he had emerged with his gear ready to leave, Ginny had pulled him aside with concern in her eyes.

'Talk to Sir about what's happening.' She had said. 'He knows your powers better than anyone. I'm sure he'll be able to explain it. You didn't mean it, Harry. Pete knows that.' Then she had leaned in and touched his lips gently with hers. 'We'll see you in few days.' Harry had nodded gravely and glanced over at Ron and Hermione, both of who had grim expressions on their faces as they made stunted comments that they would see him back at school, before Harry had finally turned to Pete.

'I'm sorry about your arm.'

'I wish I was that powerful.' Peter had said with a wry smile, and then his expression changed.

'You're still going to teach aren't you? At school I mean.'

'Sure, but I think we'll lay off the one-on-one sessions for a bit.' Harry had laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. 'I'll see you back at Hogwarts.' He had then thanked Mrs. Weasley for having him (which she waved off dismissively) and left.

But now that Harry was sitting alone in the harsh dankness of the Black house, he began to wonder whether he really should be taking the Defence classes anymore. To teach them, he had to demonstrate spells for the students to see what they were aiming for. What if something went wrong in class? He had been thinking about starting on the disarming spell when he got back. What if he cast Expelliarmus and ended up sending Ron or Hermione, or one of the young students flying backwards with such force they were knocked out, or worse?

His thoughts were interrupted by a gentle knock. Lupin's head appeared around the door enquiringly as Harry stayed where he sat.

'The guard that came back with you will stay here, the rest will continue to watch The Burrow.' He said as he strolled into the room. 'Why did you come back here before Hogwarts re-opens?' he said, taking in Harry's demeanour. 'There's only a few days left, I would have thought you would have preferred to be with the Weasley's, especially with a certain pretty young redhead there.' He smirked knowingly.

Ginny. Harry thought. Maybe because of his recent contented days with her, it had been hardest to leave her most of all. 'I'm having some ... problems with my magic.' Harry said at last.

'Problems?' Lupin raised his eyebrows. 'From what Aberforth tells me you've been doing astonishingly well, I think you're being a little hard on yourself. You have to remember you're only seventeen...'

'That's not what I mean.' Harry said, staring in front of him. 'I've learned a lot, and my powers are increasing, but that is the problem.' He looked at Lupin's frown. 'Things are happening that aren't supposed to.' He told Lupin about the gnome and Peter's injuries. 'I don't seem to be able to control it anymore. It's like I've been so obsessed with increasing my skills that they're getting beyond me.'

'Well, I can't say that I've ever heard of this sort of thing happening before.' Lupin said as he sat on the bed beside Harry. 'Normally you can increase your skill through knowledge by learning more powerful spells, but I never thought it was possible to increase the power of mastered incantations. They are what they are. Either you can cast them, or you can't, with the exception of a few of the

more advanced castings like Patronuses.' He gave Harry a curious look 'Are you sure Peter was capable of repelling a stinging hex?'

'Yes.' Harry said gravely as he cast his eyes to the floor. 'I wanted to train to help people, instead' Harry paused, reluctant to say it 'it feels like I'm becoming a danger to them.'

Neither of them spoke for a moment as Harry continued to eye the worn out rug on the floor.

'Well, if you're right, and you are developing your powers beyond the normal working level,' Lupin finally said 'then you need to find out what's causing it, and discover a way of controlling it.' Lupin stood up and peered down at Harry. 'I'm heading off tonight and will not be back before you return to Hogwarts.' Harry nodded. 'I suggest you speak with Aberforth when you meet with him next.'

'That's what Ginny said.'

'Smart girl, that one.' Lupin smiled as Harry met his gaze. 'Always thought so. Her OWL's were one of the highest levels Hogwarts has ever seen.'

'Were they?' Harry said in surprise. He had never even thought to enquire after her grades with so much going on.

'Absolutely, and considering the circumstances with which the fifth years had to sit them after last years ... events, her achievement was nothing short of astounding, far above the next closest to her, even though all the grades were scaled up in the end. Except Ginny's. A perfect score has never yet been attained across the board, and had McGonagall scaled Ginny's, she would have been the first. Professor McGonagall was all set to award her with Hogwarts highest achievement award.'

'She never said...' Harry said blankly.

'She asked the Head Mistress not to scale her results when she was called into her office earlier in the year and informed of the schools intentions. McGonagall wasn't keen on it, feeling she deserved the recognition, but Ginny was very determined.' Lupin smiled facetiously. 'I'm certain given your relationship with her you have been on the receiving end of her stubbornness. Eventually McGonagall relented. Anyway, I'm off.' Lupin said briskly. 'Try and stay out of trouble, and don't worry too much, I'm sure there will be a rational explanation for your recent magical prowess.' Lupin smiled reassuringly at Harry before leaving, closing the door behind him. Harry continued to stare into space.

So Ginny is way more talented than she's letting on, he thought. But why, why wouldn't she want the rest of them to know? Surely Mr. and Mrs. Weasley must know her results. Harry did not move for the longest time as he sat there thinking about it. The room darkened as the sun retreated, finally bringing Harry out of his reverie. He lit the candelabra in the room and picked up the thick candle from his bedside, igniting it before heading down to the kitchen to rustle up something for dinner.

Over the next couple of days, The Order members who kept guard did not intrude on Harry, only popping in a couple of times a day to check on him. Harry had grown so used to this routine that he no longer resented it, knowing they were doing their job and even feeling grateful that he still had their support.

Hermione contacted him more than once through their message log, but Harry didn't had a lot to say, merely asking after them all, and finding himself relieved to hear that Peter's arm was now free of bandages and seemed to be healing well under Mrs. Weasley's motherly care.

The night before he was to return to Hogwarts, Harry decide to repack his trunk so it would be easier to navigate when back at school, and as he did so, he came across several items he had forgotten he had even had.

The sneakoscope that Ron had given him years back was still wrapped in the same horrid pair of his uncles old socks. The presence of Scabbers no longer a problem, it whizzed no more, lying silently where it sat. So it had worked after all, Harry thought wryly as he tucked it back into the bottom of his trunk alongside the items he had procured from Fred and George's Joke shop at the beginning of last year. Once he had monotonously and rather haphazardly folded his clothing back into place, and stowed his Firebolt on top, he lifted his parent's dented black chest to stow it safely away. Without knowing why, instead of putting it back in his trunk, he sat it on the bed and settled beside

it, pointing his wand at it and opening the lock.

He hadn't explored the contents since opening it for the first time many months ago, and was just lifting the yellowed parchment note from his dad to read it again when he noticed the inside panel of the arched lid had come loose. It must have happened that awful day when Ginny had discovered him with Julie and he dropped the chest. He pushed the panel back with his fingers in an effort to replace it, but it sprung back, dangling open wider than before as something silvery slid into view above the panel.

Harry slid his fingers in and eased the object out, and in uncertain disbelief, he brought it closer to his face.

It was mirror. Not just any mirror. As he turned it over in his hand, he realized it was an exact copy of the small oval mirror Sirius had once given him. His heartbeat quickened as his mind raced. He placed the mirror carefully on the bed and grabbed his father's letter, opening with shaky hands.

As he read through it slowly, he studied every word carefully.

*...rest Lily,*

*...e home as soon as...  
...merick to deliver this t...  
...received news of his pla...  
...will be all hands on d...  
...w is my little guy do...  
...bout you both, day and...  
...in with Sooty to make su...  
...member to use the m...*

He stopped.

Parts of his father's words were missing, parts that when he had first read them had meant little to him. But now, glancing down at the silvery object that lay beside him, he began to piece it together. He looked back at the letter and read on...

*... will come as soon as...  
...ss you my darling Lily...  
...unior a hug from his da...  
...y love, James*

He went back to the few lines that had his heartbeat racing and read it again.

*...member to use the m...  
... will come as soon as...*

"member to use the m...?" Had it once said, "Remember to use the mirror"? The word that was missing from the beginning of the next sentence ... could it be ... was it even possible his father was referring to Sirius? Harry swallowed hard as he picked up the mirror and held it up alongside the parchment. He looked back and forth, from the mirror to the letter.

*...member to use the m...  
... will come as soon as...*

Over and over he looked at the wording, and the more he read it, the more he believed in his train of thought. Then the reality hit him. His stomach dropped painfully.

Even if this did mean that his mother had had a mirror just like the one Sirius had given him, Sirius was gone – dead. The mirror would be useless. He slowly, reluctantly replaced the parchment in the chest, carefully adding the mirror on top, and then closed the lid, securing the latch.

After he had finished packing, he extinguished the candelabra, leaving only the one dull candle light on his bedside table to illuminate the room, and lay back on the top of his bed, his hands behind his

head as he stared up at the flaky paintwork on the ceiling. Hedwig scratched about on top of the wardrobe, before fluttering soundlessly down to the windowsill by the bed. Harry lifted himself up and reached across to open the window for her. She trilled gently and swooped out into the cold night air, obviously looking forward to her night's hunt. Harry reclined again, leaving the window open so she could come back at her leisure.

Harry tried to empty his mind, but the thoughts that plagued him would not abate.

Ever since he had arrived he had been curious as to why Ginny had been so secretive about her abilities, and his worry over his own unexplainable increase in magical powers, along with the fact that he had not been able to let go of the hauntingly eerie fact that Neville's body had been stolen had already cost him dearly in the sleep department. And now ... now he had the added discomfort of his discovery of the mirror.

The icy air that dropped through the open window stretched its tentacles out, creeping through the room. Harry yanked off his shoes and pulled the blankets back, burying himself under the covers still fully clothed. All of these questions, he thought. So many things that concerned him when he knew he was supposed to be focused on only one thing: discovering what the next Horcrux was and destroying it.

He turned over impatiently, willing the seductive plume of sleep to encase him; determined to lye there until he fell asleep. Harry closed his eyes and tried to push everything from his mind.

How long he hovered in the state of almost sleep, he didn't know, but something jolted him suddenly to full consciousness. He felt it before he could even open his eyes. Clumsily he threw himself off the bed, the blankets twisting around him as he went. He hit the floor in the small gap between his bed and the window with a thud, grabbing urgently for his wand, which still resided in the pocket of his jeans. Fighting the restricting sheets, an arrogant, lingering voice uttered as he wrestled desperately.

'Well, that is possibly one of the most amusing things I've seen since our last meeting.'

Harry wriggled in the narrow prison as he struggled to pull his wand out and get free of the blankets, Snape's drawl mocking his efforts.

'Did you do that on purpose, or is it a frequent event?'

~\*~\*~\*~

Harry finally managed to yank his wand free and kick the bedding off his feet. His heart was racing as he scrambled to his feet, straightening his glasses, which were badly askew from not only falling asleep with them on, but also from his face abruptly meeting with the floor.

Snape was standing just inside the doorway, adorned in fathomlessly black Death Eater robes, glaring at Harry. There was no trace of the half-hearted attempts of mockery that Harry expected to see in his expression, in fact, he looked pale and pasty and incredibly grim - even more so than usual.

*"You left us to die!"* Harry blurted.

It was out of his mouth before he could even think about what he wanted to say. He had been stewing for months over the after-effects of the spell he, Ron and Hermione had conjured on Halloween to counter the Quintapedes, and now, faced with Snape's sudden presence, his anger swarmed inside him dangerously and radiating out through every single pore on his body.

Snape did not flinch. He understood exactly what Harry was referring to. He remained rigid as he spoke.

"There was no other way to stop the onslaught."

"You could have warned us!" Harry jerked his wand as he spoke. "Instead, you left us completely vulnerable!" His chest was heaving as his knuckles whitened over his wand. "But I guess that's exactly what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Not taking his eyes off Snape, who had his wand aimed uncharacteristically casually in his direction, Harry edged out from behind the bed, scuffing the blankets under foot in an effort not to trip over them.

"And what meandering path of wisdom brought you to that *logical* conclusion?" Snape drawled as he followed Harry's movements with his wand.

"You set us up." Harry's skin was tingling and burning with violent fury. He rounded the bed and stopped in front of it. "You neglected to tell me that we'd be useless to defend ourselves in the aftermath. You used us to do your dirty for you, knowing you were landing Bellatrix in hot water for her failure, and then hoping we'd be wiped out by her wrath."

"As always, your powers for deduction are nothing short of – astonishing." Snape's sarcasm glowered as he raised an eyebrow. "Explain to me why I would want to destroy both Bellatrix LeStrange *and* the great Harry Potter? Surely even you had trouble piecing that together and making it stick?"

"You've always hated me." Harry said with no trace of bitterness. His voice was dark and controlled. "It's not that hard to imagine you wanting me dead – especially after you killed Dumbledore." Snape winced slightly. "And you at least *pretended* to tolerate him."

A change had come over Snape at the mention of Dumbledore. His shoulders, usually stiff and ready, slumped forward marginally, and his skin seemed to drain of the shadow of natural colour it barely contained, leaving him pallid and ghostly looking. Harry might have thought he looked almost remorseful – if he didn't know better.

"Dumbledore knew what could happen – what *would* happen." Snape said, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"*What?*" Harry's anger was rapidly morphing into pure fury. "You evil..." The name Harry tagged Snape with at this point was so shockingly coarse that Snape's eyes immediately snapped back to him. "He trusted you! He believed in you when no one else would have given you the time of day! And how did you repay him? You killed him in cold blood when he was sick enough to probably be dying already!"

Snape's jaw set as he spoke scathingly. "It would pay you not to be so presumptuous. My-"

"I know more than you think!" Harry unconsciously advanced, stopping after his first step as he realized his closeness to his hated ex-professor, and making Snape renew his grip on his wand. "You managed to slime your way into Dumbledore's confidence by turning on Voldemort. But I was there! I was there that night on the tower. I saw you kill Dumbledore - minutes after he asked me to find you so you could *help* him!" Harry held back the maddening, bitter tears that stung his eyes, infuriated at the thoughts of breaking down in front of Snape.

"You even had a hand in Sirius's death because you let your pathetic pride interfere with our Occlumency sessions, letting me see exactly what Voldemort wanted me to see. And somehow, you conveniently didn't act fast enough the night he died, either. Strange how it took so long for the Order to arrive."

"I did what I could." Snape injected calmly. "If you had done as you were-"

"You started *all* of this!" Harry cut him off, advancing again as his hatred pulsed uncontrollably, his voice growing higher as he spoke. "You went running to your *master* after hearing part of the Prophecy. *You're* the one who's responsible for Voldemort's unrelenting vendetta against me! *You're* the one who is responsible for my parents deaths!"

Harry seethed dangerously as he stopped only feet away from Snape. They were standing face to face, wands aligned and running parallel, yet pointed in opposite directions. Snape looked like he

was going to be sick there and then. Harry glared at him, overwhelmed by the need to *do* something to Snape. Guilt. So close now, Harry could see it in Snape's face. But it was indefinable guilt. It was impossible to think that Snape felt the deep and painful regret of his wrongdoing that seemed to be etched across his features.

"Dumbledore told you." Snape's words weren't so much a question, more a grim statement, uttered in a strangled voice.

"No – he didn't. Though he should have. He would *never* have betrayed you like that." The sourness of Harry's words registered on Snape's face. "He insisted that you were to be trusted. He said he had an 'iron-clad' reason for believing in you – and you killed him."

Snape's eyes were shadowed as he spoke.

"I never liked your father,"

Harry gaped at Snape. His mind raced in an effort to come up with the most horrible of the new curses he had practiced over the Christmas break.

"But your mother ... loved him." Snape screwed up his face in distaste; the word 'loved' rolling off his tongue like a brick. "And I would never have wished her any harm."

Harry was pulled out of his mental checklist. "What?"

"Your mother, Lily" Snape turned his gaze from Harry "was my potions partner in my NEWT years at Hogwarts." Snape lowered his wand a fraction as his gaze settled on Harry's bewildered one. "She was – a good person. Too good for likes of James Potter. But she saw something in him he must have kept exceedingly well hidden from most. I was forced to believe that he must have had *some* redeeming qualities because I knew her. She was no fool."

Harry stared dumbfounded. This was too much to take in! He knew his mother was gifted at potions from what Slughorn had said, but he never thought of her having a connection to Severus Snape; especially given he had seen the memory in the pensieve. She had made an effort to intervene when his father had had Snape humiliatingly dangling upside-down with his underwear on display to the whole school, but his scathing refusal of her help, and her subsequent reluctant giggle when his father had jumped to her defence had made him believe there was no love lost between his mother and Snape. It had never occurred to him that they would have been thrown together and actually developed some kind of – *friendship*?

"You ... my mother?"

Snape was eyeing Harry under half-closed lids. His expression unreadable.

"She was an extraordinary woman." Snape said, a flicker of – was it – fondness? Crossing his face. "We would have remained friends if it wasn't for her – devotion – to James."

Harry stalled for a moment, trying desperately to absorb this unwanted information. If this was true, if Snape was really 'friends' with his mother, then that complicated everything Harry thought to be true. They had worked together as partners – mixing, measuring, stirring, talking, and maybe even laughing? A repugnant and irrational – decidedly irrational - fear came out of the blue and was slowly uncoiling in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"You..." Harry was beginning to feel sick at the thought that was pressing in on him. "You ... and my mother..." He said slowly.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry felt like he almost couldn't breathe. "You weren't..." His train of thought that ran along the lines of somewhere Harry thought he would never have to go must have shown, because Snape cut in abruptly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter! Your mother and I were only ever potions partners."

Harry was suddenly awash with relief. Snape appeared irritated, disgusted, and ... faintly amused.

"But in those two years I grew to respect her, though it pains me to admit to *you*. Believe me."

Snape's tone ruffled Harry's ire again as he swallowed the bile that had been creeping up at the thoughts of his mother and Snape being ... lovers. "How could you have told Voldemort?"

"I didn't know!" Snape snapped. "Since you know so much, you should be aware I only heard part of the Prophecy. I had no idea your mother was pregnant at the time. We hadn't spoken since we graduated." Did Snape actually look regretful? "We both walked very separate paths after that..." He sounded extremely weary as he trailed off.

"So you're washing your hands clean then?" Harry said grievously. "Blood doesn't come off that easily, Snape!" Snape sucked in a deep breath. "You would have known he was going after my family, wouldn't you? And you let them die anyway."

"I did try to stop it from happening. When I found out-"

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IT!" Harry roared. Snape stood his ground and kept his wand low. "Nothing you can say will change everything that's happened!"

"Of course it won't!" Snape said icily. "But its inevitable we play out this charming little scenario before its too late!"

"Too late for what?" Harry shouted.

"For you to realize who your allies are!" Snape said steadily.

Harry stared at Snape for a moment.

"Oh," Harry said slowly. "I get it. You're going to try to do to me what you did to Dumbledore. You're going to try and tell me you're really on my side, aren't you?" He sneered at the thought.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Need I waste my breath?"

Harry scoffed. "How stupid do you really think I am? – On second thoughts - don't answer that! I already know. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Snape's shoulders dropped as he breathed out heavily. "I'm not doing this under the delusion that we can ever trust in one another. That would be fool-hardy to say the least, given our history." Snape eyed Harry's wand. "I would appreciate it if you would lower that somewhat, however. It might go off accidentally – given your disposition."

"Its not accidentally you should be worried about." Harry said. Nothing Snape could say would change the fact that he had been the one to tell Voldemort about the Prophecy. There was no absolution for his betrayal of Dumbledore. Yet Harry found himself relaxing his arm anyway. His mother had seen something Snape, something that Harry couldn't, maybe just like Snape with James.

"Thank you." Snape said.

"Don't thank me yet."

"You have too much confidence in your abilities, Potter."

"Are you going to tell me why you are here, or not?" Harry said, his anger and hatred holding under a very fine leash.

"Yes. But as I don't have time to give you all the answers you seek," Snape said as he relaxed his own grip on his wand further "you will have to go back to what you once knew." At Harry's frown, Snape continued. "You always had faith in Dumbledore. Dumbledore had faith in me. You will need

to utilize that to get to the next Horcrux."

Harry froze. He stared at Snape dumbly.

"Surprised?" Snape asked.

"Not really." Harry rushed, recovering as quickly as he could. "Voldemort knows I'm after them. He probably told you as you're one of his 'most trusted servants' – in fact he probably sent you here–"

"Do not assume to second guess what Voldemort is thinking, or doing!" Snape cut in angrily. "He trusts no one! He sends out clueless individuals under the guise that they are redeeming themselves, knowing that they will do whatever it takes to keep their family safe." Harry frowned again. Snape rolled his eyes. "I am, of course, speaking of Mr. Malfoy."

"Lucius is not what I'd call 'clueless'. He's–"

"I'm not talking about Lucius, you twit! I'm talking about his son!"

"Draco?"

"Yes."

"So," Harry's mind raced. "He's looking for a Horcrux? At Hogwarts?"

"Yes, and no." Snape said grimly. "He's had no idea why he's been looking for the object assigned, he's only trying to prevent his father from being murdered – as his mother was."

A dull ache surged from the pit of Harry's stomach. Draco Malfoy was far from his favourite person in the world, but he couldn't help empathizing with him when it came to losing his mum and dad – however horrible they were.

He thought Draco Malfoy had looked somewhat thinner the last time he'd seen him. Even in the strange black light of the Lumo Sepia charm, his pale grey eyes had look haunted, and his cheeks hollow. It was obvious he was still struggling. Lucius too, had looked thin. Maybe from his stay in Azkaban. Even though it was no longer guarded by dementors, it still couldn't have been pleasant. Not that Lucius Malfoy deserved pleasant. He had gloated over Harry's incompetence and almost let something slip, but Draco had stepped in. It was automatic – the way he had reined in his father. Protective even.

"What do you mean, yes *and* no?" Harry asked, trying to focus on the Horcruxes.

"I mean, that what Draco Malfoy has been sent to find may – or may not – be a Horcrux." Snape was holding Harry's gaze meaningfully. "The true dilemma he faces is finding it. The Dark Lord is growing impatient. He is ready to ... remove Draco and send in others."

Harry knew immediately what Snape meant by 'remove'. "Others?"

"Others who would not think twice about killing anyone that discovered them. Including children."

Harry swallowed.

"I think you will agree that that particular situation would be best avoided." Something flashed across Snape's expression, but it was gone before Harry could get a handle on it.

"Why did he send Draco in the first place?" Harry asked suspiciously. "Its not like he did a magnificent job the last time, is it?" Harry bit down on the venomous remark that sat on his tongue about Snape's involvement.

Snape seemed to pick up on his restraint. "You are aware Draco is not a killer. That does not mean he cannot be of use to the Dark Lord – for a time. But his time is rapidly running out. He needs your help."



Harry spluttered a disbelieving cough.

"You're joking!" He couldn't stop the incredulous smile from hitting his lips. "You're asking me to help Draco Malfoy find a Horcrux so he can return it to Voldemort?"

"No." Snape said coolly, choosing his words carefully. "I'm telling you that if you do not help Mr. Malfoy find what he is looking for, then both he, and his father, are dead." Snape tilted his head as he played his card. "Though who would have to watch whom die, I cannot say."

Harry was beginning to feel nauseas. He could honestly say that he couldn't care less if Voldemort decided to send Lucius off in a halo of green light. But Draco – he didn't deserve that. Nor did he deserve to have his father's death on his conscience.

"I can't." Harry said with difficulty. The first time he and Draco met in Hagrid's hut, Harry had seen that Draco had his mother's death weighing on him - bending him to the point of breaking. Harry suspected that his father's death would shatter him completely. "I can't do that. I can't hand over a Horcrux to Voldemort." Harry's voice cracked as he spoke.

Snape's expression didn't move, as if he had expected Harry's answer. Harry met his gaze, battling with himself over his feelings of guilt.

Snape's eyes grew hard.

A strange muzzy feeling encroached on Harry, something like an invisible hand reaching into his mind, easing in, and then pushing in – intent on seeking and probing.

Harry felt a shift in his thoughts; an image was struggling to appear. It was like a page in a scrapbook, sticky with sloppy glue, being pried open.

*No!*

He knew this feeling, but he had never been able to recognize it so quickly and prevent the barrage of mental slides – memories in pieces - surfacing at the urge of another. Harry pulled on an empty, dark space in his mind as he resisted Snape's intrusion, a black hole of nothingness, and swiftly settled there.

*"Get out of my head!"* Harry yelled. A second later, the push was gone.

Snape was standing before Harry, eyeing him curiously.

"Don't do that!" Harry said, angered by Snape's attempted invasion.

"You closed your mind." Snape said frowning. "Very efficiently too. Strange considering where you were a few months ago."

"A lot of things have changed." Harry said defiantly, remembering his surges in power. He tried to keep his tone level, unwilling for Snape to realize that Harry was as surprised by his ability to shut out Snape as Snape was.

Snape seemed to be thinking to himself, and then he nodded his head briefly.

"Unexpected. This is something I hadn't dare count on," he glanced back to Harry "knowing your previous endeavours." He added insultingly. He still couldn't resist a poke at Harry, even through this unlikely truce. Snape was weighing something up in his mind, and then he straightened and drew breath. "You *will* help Draco, and you *will* allow him to take the item to Voldemort because it is *not* a Horcrux."

"What? ... But you just said-"

"Don't argue with me - I'm running out of time and patience for this bantering!" Snape's voice returned to his usual tone in the classroom. "Draco will need your help in getting into the Headmaster's office. He will also require access to the pensieve."

"Er... " Harry stared blankly, utterly bereft of any power to reason out what Snape was saying.

Snape sighed exaggeratedly. "I see your verbal skills haven't improved." Then very slowly, as if talking to the temporarily deaf, he continued. "Get Draco into the Head Office. There you will find the information you both require to go further."

"Hang on" Harry said, remembering something. "Malfoy has already been in the Head Office. Over the summer break."

Snape narrowed his glare. "How do you know that?"

"Why didn't he get the information he needed then?" Harry asked, ignoring Snape.

Snape narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but he did not pursue the matter - perhaps because he was, indeed, running out of time.

"Because neither of you were ready before now. The information would have brought about not only his demise, but other's as well. Not to mention most likely yours."

Harry raised an eyebrow in cynical disbelief. "Concerned for my welfare?"

"When it is tied to Draco Malfoy's - yes."

"How did he get -"

"I will be missed." Snape cut in impatiently. "The password to access the cabinet is..." Snape paused and wrinkled his nose. "Lollygobble." He looked like something particularly nasty had wafted under his nose. "You will need to disband the silencing charm surrounding the cabinet before you use the password. Draco will know how."

"I know how to cancel a simple silencing charm!" Harry was stupidly irritated at Snape's continued inference that he was a useless wizard.

"Being child's play, I would hope so." Snape drawled. "But this is no ordinary silencing charm."

"Why does Draco even need my help?"

"For one - he does not have the password - not to the Heads office, or the cabinet. In fact, he isn't aware he needs one to gain access to the pensieve. Also, he will need you specifically to locate the item - if I am correct."

"How do I know he won't try to attack me when my back is turned?" Harry's old rivalry surfaced. He felt quietly confident at a duel with Malfoy, but if he let his guard down enough to do this, he doubted Draco would allow him the opportunity of fighting back, if he decided to turn on Harry.

Snape sighed. "Has he pursued you even once in the whole time he's been in and out of Hogwarts?"

Harry thought about it, and then frowned.

"Well ... no."

"Am I right in saying then, that the two times you came in contact with him was when *you* were pursuing *him*?"

"I. Well. I..."

"Precisely." Snape sneered slightly. "You would do well to keep that in mind, Potter. Draco Malfoy is walking a thin line, and under much duress. He could still fall either way. But remember - he has posed no threat to anyone at Hogwarts this year. I must leave." He paused just as he was about to turn and considered Harry. "I hope we can forego any of the unnecessary parting rituals we have become accustomed to of late."

Harry stared at Snape, registering a great weariness lurking in him. He nodded once.

Snape looked mildly surprised, then turned to leave.

"I do have a question for you though. Well, a couple actually."

Snape sighed impatiently and turned to face him.

"Firstly – How am I going to help Malfoy if I don't even know where he is?"

*"He will find you."*

"Oh." This was somewhat unsettling. The thoughts that Draco could track him down so easily hadn't really occurred to him before. He had always been concerned with the safety of the other students at the school. Harry barged on before he could re-think himself.

"Why did you kill Dumbledore?"

Snape stiffened. His eyes shuttered and he appeared completely closed.

"The answer to that will present itself when you are not seeking it."

Harry hated these cryptic answers. Absolutely hated them - having had more than his fair share of them over the years. Snape was almost beginning to sound like Dumbledore.

"How can I believe anything you've said?" There was no malice in his question, just a great deal of his own weariness.

Snape answered bleakly.

"When the time is right, inform Miss. Granger and Mr. Weasley that, under the circumstances, I do not consider they owe me a life debt."

And with that, Snape was gone.

## 26. Uncovering Draco Malfoy - Part 1

The cloak of night reluctantly receded.

Shadows stretched and thinned under dawn's bloody glow as it encroached on the ancient, crumbling stonework that perched on the rocky drop-off. The wild grass that tufted through the salt-burned snow at the foot of weary walls was blonde and brittle and dead. The trees that rimmed the Dark Forest gripped the edge of the rugged and relentlessly weathered cliffs, leaning heavily over the exposed expanse burdened not by too much snow, but by the presence of what lay hidden within their depths.

Beneath the rubble of what was left of the old castle, in the bowls of a long forgotten fortress, two figures waited. One sat hidden by an emerald swathed winged backed chair edged with blackened steel serpents that appeared frozen in mid-writhe. The other stood tall and dark and rigid just inside the damp stone archway that led into the dreary chamber.

"You have seen the boy?"

A voice like ice and daggers rose from the chair.

"Yes, my Lord." Snape bowed his head even though he could not be seen.

"And." Said more as a warning than a question.

"He will do as expected."

"And the other?"

"She will be ours in a matter of days."

The waves that bombarded and crashed against the jagged cliff face somewhere behind the walls of the underground chamber hummed their fury through the room.

"The dragon whelp will be brought to me before the full moon." The order was laced with displeasure. "Lucius will have the opportunity to make amends for his ... mistakes." The last word hissed out evilly.

"Yes, my Lord."

Snape stayed in his half-bow, waiting. Finally, like shards of glass, the voice shattered the silence.

"Do you think I am being too harsh on him?" the voice asked silkily.

"Young Malfoy is of no consequence, my Lord."

A malevolent chuckle followed. "You betray your feelings, Severus. I was referring to Lucius."

The silence that followed unsettled the very air between the two. A scaly white hand that had rested lightly on the snakehead arm of the chair motioned casually.

"Come. Stand before me, Severus. Let me see you."

Snape instantly glided across the room, his black robes swirling behind him. In one swift easy movement, head bowed, he lowered himself on one knee, lacing his hands across the other raised knee, and subjugated himself at the foot of Lord Voldemort.

Long white fingers ending in unnatural, talon-like nails came to rest under Snape's chin.

"You are such a contradiction." Voldemort mused almost fondly. "So eagerly you betray *trusted* companions to their deaths, yet you are willing to suffer the incompetence of an imp."

The fingers gently forced Snape to raise his gaze to meet the two red, reptilian eyes that studied him.

"Could it be that you *love* Draco, Severus?"

Snape said unflinchingly. "I would tear the last breath from him if you wished it, my Lord."

With the removal of the hand, Snape lowered his head once more.

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"Where's Hermione?"

It was a question Harry had heard more times in the last week than anyone needed to hear in a lifetime.

"I don't know." Harry sighed. "I've been with you all evening. Why are you asking me?"

Ron scratched something out on the parchment he had sprawled in his lap and screwed his nose up in frustration.

"I need her." He said matter-of-factly. "How am I supposed to know why the Dicta charms require swishes and not flicks? I can't finish this ludicrously long essay if she's not around." He looked up at Harry with a slight worry crease between his eyebrows. "Where does she keep disappearing off to, anyway? Ever since we got back I've hardly seen her."

"We're talking about Hermione, Ron" Harry said, sounding exasperated. "Its NEWT year."

"Yeah. But that doesn't explain why she's not here studying with us, does it?" He turned back to his parchment and scribbled something down and added sulkily. "She always studies with us."

Harry rolled up his transfiguration homework with a frown, giving up completely on being able to concentrate. At the beginning of the week, Ron and Hermione (mostly Hermione - Ron having been reluctantly recruited) had cornered Harry and admonished that he needed to start catching up on his schoolwork since the year was already half over. (After all, if Harry wanted any kind of shot at being an auror he ought to buckle down every free moment he had.) Harry had tried to put the effort in, but even though potions classes had been suspended until the replacement professor arrived on Monday, giving them all more free time, and every night this week he had his nose buried in a book with a concentrated look on his face, instead of absorbing and understanding and writing about the information in front of him, his mind hadn't taken in a word of it. He found he had too many things going on inside his head. Things that were pressing and couldn't wait.

Not the least of which was that the three of them seemed to have hit a brick wall in uncovering the identity of the unknown Horcrux.

Harry was almost certain Hermione was using *some* of the time she spent hidden away researching what the item could be. Yet so far, she had not, as was her usual want, come bounding up to Harry and Ron loaded with the latest brilliant epiphany that would set them all on the right track again. He had tried to pin her down to discussing it with him on several occasions, but Hermione had taken to making fumbling excuses, shooting Harry pained or nervous glances as she invariably made her exit. Not like Hermione at all. She should have been huddled in whispered conversation with Harry and Ron at every opportune moment. But she wasn't. In fact, Harry was beginning to get the distinct impression that Hermione had been avoiding him.

Harry stuffed his books and papers in his already overfilled bag that leant against the foot of his chair.

"I'm going for some air."

Ron looked up, the crushed end of his quill tip hovering near his mouth. "If you see Hermione, tell her it's getting late, will you?" Harry nodded. "Do you want me to do the rounds for you?"

Harry smiled reassuringly and stood up. "Its fine. I'll do it on the way back."

"You going to the lake?"

"Yeah." Harry threw his bag over his shoulder and climbed the dormitory stairs to drop off his books, retrieve some warmer clothing and don his invisibility cloak. Ron didn't quiz Harry as to why he was headed to the lake again, or offer to come along. For which Harry was glad. His best friend seemed quite happy to give him the room he needed. Something Hermione never really quite got the hang of – until recently that is.

When Harry emerged back in the common room, thanks to his trusty cloak, no eyes were on him as he crossed the room unseen and crawled through the portrait hole to make his way along the deserted halls.

The time spent away from Hogwarts at Christmas, had brought into sharp belief just how often the other students spent covertly eyeing Harry. He found himself keenly aware of the hands that shaded whispering mouths, the swing of heads that turned quickly away when his eyes roamed a room, and worst of all, the expectant, doey eyes of the younger students who not so much as looked *at* him, but *to* him. For what, Harry knew all too well, and he found it disconcerting, to say the least.

Harry stopped momentarily as he walked across the grounds and cast a cautious warming charm on himself. He had spoken to Sir at their first meeting when he had returned to Hogwarts and explained the problems he'd been having with his magic. Sir had looked troubled to begin with, and remained silent for some time before offering the explanation that Harry's magic was 'spiking', and that it was most likely to do with the new, more powerful spells he'd been practising.

After the first session, (and several incidents of near misses with unexpected effects) Sir cautioned Harry, telling him that he needed to rein in his emotions. The problems appeared to surface mostly when Harry was overly emotive, and then again nearer the end of the lesson, when he was worn out. It was up to Harry, Sir said, to keep control of his feelings, and by so doing, control the spikes.

When Harry reached the small jetty overhanging the lake, he removed his father's cloak and perched himself on the edge of the pier, dangling his legs above the waters edge. This was the fourth night in a row (bar the night before last when it had poured torrential rain on the castle) that he had sat in this spot. It was a nice spot to sit. Something about the lazy ripples of the black water was incredibly calming, giving Harry a chance to churn his thoughts uninterrupted.

It also gave Malfoy the perfect opportunity to approach Harry. Which still hadn't happened.

Harry was growing increasingly restless. He glanced over his shoulder, and then looked back out over the spangled surface of the lake.

It had been almost a week since the return of school, and he was beginning to wonder if Malfoy was ever going to make himself known. Harry was tired of waiting for something to happen. The anticipation was wearing on him. It was almost tempting to just give up on this uncomfortable quest of Snape's and forget completely about any trouble Malfoy may have landed himself him. To be honest, Harry wasn't entirely sure if Malfoy didn't deserve all he might get. He had always been excessively vicious to Harry and his friends. Ever since day one. Really, what did Harry care if Malfoy's nasty disposition and narrow-minded prejudices were about to ricochet back onto him? You reap what you sow. Right?

There was the slight problem however, that according to Snape, Harry was going to need Malfoy to get to the next Horcrux.

Harry breathed out loudly and shifted in his spot.

He hadn't quite managed to come to terms with Snape's revelation about his friendship with his mother. In a way, maybe it wasn't as shocking as perhaps he would have expected months ago. It was more the fact that Harry didn't *want* to believe it.

From what Lupin had told him about Lily, she was the kind of person who would befriend the unbefrienable. Until recently, Harry had never been in doubt that underneath Snape's cold, oily and decidedly ugly exterior, he harboured just as much icy disgust, greasy bitterness, and unattractive hatred as he reflected outwardly.

But then, he had gone and given Harry the means to prevent Bellatrix from destroying Hogsmeade - and he had saved Ron and Hermione. That had to count for something. So now Harry was finding himself reluctantly believing that there might actually be more to Snape than the loathsome Death Eater.

Yet Harry couldn't quite trust him. Maybe it came down to all the years of their mutual loathing. Something like that couldn't be erased in a matter of weeks or months even, let alone days. In the end, his instincts kept him wary.

Harry picked up one of the small pebbles that littered the jetty and tossed it into the lake impatiently.

Why hadn't Malfoy accosted him yet? There was still one more Horcrux before Harry could leave Hogwarts in search of Nagini and Riddle. The unknown Horcrux. The Horcrux that Voldemort is apparently trying to re-acquire from Hogwarts, and yet Snape says isn't a Horcrux at all. How could Voldemort not know what all of his Horcruxes were? Snape was either wrong, or he was lying just

so Harry would hand it over to Malfoy. Either way, it still meant the item must be a Horcrux. There was no logical reason why Voldemort would send Malfoy in on a wild goose chase, and therefore, there was no way Harry was going to hand his prize over to Draco Malfoy once it was in his possession.

But he needed the Slytherin to acquire it since Malfoy knew the way passed the pensieves silencing ward and Harry did not. Though, thinking about it, if he spoke to McGonagall, maybe she might be able to disarm it. After all, she was the Headmistress now, and she was also about as close to Dumbledore as anyone could have been. It's not like he had to keep it a secret from her anymore. She knows about the Horcruxes now.

...Yes.

Yes. It was less risky and all together a much more comforting thought to work with McGonagall than Malfoy. So he would speak to McGonagall and she was sure to help. That way he could by-pass his long time schoolyard enemy completely.

But then...

He would essentially be leaving the other boy to his fate. In fact, Harry was as good as holding the wand that would send the killing curse that would take the breath from Draco Malfoy.

Harry let out a frustrated sigh.

He sat there for some time, pondering his many thoughts by the lake, hoping - yet dreading - Malfoy would show. Eventually, Harry picked himself up, throwing the cloak over his head, and made his way back to the castle.

He couldn't keep waiting for Malfoy to appear. He had to get into that pensieve as soon as possible. He would have to approach McGonagall in the morning. Tomorrow was Saturday, that would give them both plenty of time to work on getting into the pensieve.

Harry eased open the heavy front doors and slipped quietly into the entrance hall. It was late. Much later than he had realised, and he still had to do his Head Boy rounds. Deciding to start in the dungeons and work his way up, he headed over to the stairs and trudged down them, thinking they wouldn't take long to do as most of the area was deserted now the Slytherins no longer resided there and Slughorn was still catatonic in St Mungos.

He strolled along the familiar corridors, occasionally checking doors whilst keeping an eye out for anything out of place. He did not bother to remove his invisibility cloak as it shielded him against the penetrating dampness that clung to the dungeons, *and* prevented the usual exchanging of unpleasantities with Filch if he should happen by the old caretaker or his eerie cat. He passed by portraits and tapestries, and blank wall, descending more stairs in the underground passageways, working his way along steadily through torchlight and shadow, and then stopped suddenly.

He cocked his head and listened. Nothing.

Harry looked up ahead of him, and then turned to search the area behind him, but could see nothing but the empty corridor in both directions.

Then faint scuffling sounds drifted down the stairs behind him. Harry watched from where he stood, but no one appeared at the bottom.

Harry drew his wand and pushed his back against the wall. He was still not able to see anyone, but the person was most definitely in the corridor with him now. It wasn't an Order member patrolling the castle; Harry had stumbled on them often enough in his Head Boy travels to know they did not use invisibility cloaks inside.

Suddenly, the scuff of a shoe on stone sounded impossibly close.

Harry held his breath.

A voice whispered near his ear, and then Harry was falling backwards.

The sound of stone scraping against stone covered Harry's 'oof' as he hit the floor. He lay there for a stunned second, watching the wall close in front of him, and then frantically pulled his feet up to make sure they weren't poking out of the cloak, which mercifully, had clung to him as he fell.

A quick glance around, and he instantly recognised his surroundings. The Slytherin common room. It had been years since he had been there with Ron, but it was immediately recognisable. The House colours of green and silver overwhelmed the area, broken only rarely by the stray, dark colouring of expensive hardwoods, or the golden glow of a lit torch.

His eyes were drawn to a door that suddenly opened seemingly of its own accord and then closed again.

Harry got to his feet carefully, wand still grasped in hand, adjusting his cloak as he went. No one was supposed to have access to old common rooms. It was one of the first things McGonagall had explained to Harry when she went over his duties. They were locked, she said, closed off so that the students wouldn't be tempted to try returning to them. It also lessoned the area needing to be patrolled.

Yet here Harry was, standing in the obviously inhabited dormitory, eyeing the door that someone had just passed through.

He wanted to open it. But if he just burst through it, whoever it was might be right on the other side, or worse, still in the room with him, then he'd give himself away, and that could lead to all sorts of problems, especially as his magic was unpredictable at the moment. Whoever it was definitely shouldn't be here. Actually, Harry had a fairly good idea who the ownerless footsteps belonged to, but what they were doing had his curiosity piqued.

He really wanted to open the door and follow, and had made up his mind to risk it when the door opened again and Draco Malfoy walked into the room.

Harry fought the instinct to whip off his cloak and confront Malfoy then and there, choosing to stay hidden instead. Maybe it was because Malfoy had such an intense look on his face as he was walking to the fireplace, like he was on important business.

Harry watched quietly as the boy pushed the coffee table away from the front of the fireplace and began pulling cushions off the chairs and couches, throwing them onto the floor at his feet. Well. No. That wasn't quite accurate. He was placing them – rather meticulously – in a solid circle on the threadbare rug.

When he was contented with the layout of the cushions, Malfoy yanked a white pillowslip out of his cloak pocket and laid it on the table behind him. He slid his cloak off and folded it neatly over a green leather armchair and then grabbed the bottom of his fleecy jumper and pulled it off over his head, mussing up his silver blonde hair so it uncharacteristically stuck out in all directions. He folded the jumper just as carefully as he had the cloak, and then raked his fingers through his hair, smoothing it down before moving onto the cuff of his shirt.

Harry could tell by Malfoy's actions that all of this was a well-practised routine, and it made him wonder just how long the Slytherin had been residing in the common room undetected.

Harry was just thinking to himself that if Malfoy was going to sleep in the buff then he would have to reveal himself, and soon, when Malfoy did something wholly unexpected. Instead of moving onto the right cuff to remove his shirt altogether, he rolled up the sleeve of his left arm.

Harry sucked in a breath.

The Dark Mark stood out stark and aggressive against the pale skin beneath it.

The Slytherin reached behind him and picked up the pillowcase. He slowly began twisting it tightly, round and round, until it was a solid roll of fabric between his hands. Harry wondered what this bizarre ritual was leading up to, but Malfoy was facing away, towards the fireplace leaving Harry



unable to make out the Slytherins expression.

So he moved closer.

As he neared, Harry's eyes were drawn to the Mark, the skin surrounding which was yellowed and purpled indicating both new and old bruising. As his gaze wandered up, he took in the tension in the blonde's arms and the stiff stance of his shoulders. Malfoy's jaw was moving as he ground his teeth together, and Harry was taken aback at the unguarded, haunted look of the Slytherins darkly encircled eyes. The boy's breathing was coming in quick, expectant pants as he wiped the light beading of sweat off his brow with a slight tremble in his hand.

Harry swallowed.

Raw fear was radiating from the Slytherin.

Malfoy dropped to his knees on the cushions. He drew several long, deep breaths before placing the white cloth between his teeth and wrapping it around the back of his head, tying it off with a sharp tug. He then brought his right palm up over the Dark Mark and bowed his head.

And there he stayed, not moving except for the steady rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed slowly in and out through his nose.

Harry glanced at the fireplace, but it showed no signs of life, so he watched Malfoy, both bewildered and fascinated.

The only sound in the room aside from Malfoy's sharp breaths was coming from a Grandfather clock steadily tick-tocking somewhere behind Harry. Suddenly Harry was startled out of his voyeurism by its melodic chime signalling the midnight hour. Reflex made his head swivel round to look at it.

A split second later, another sound pierced the room.

Harry swung his head back to Malfoy.

He was still kneeling in the same position, but the guttural moan now emanating from the boy's mouth, muffled by both the pillowcase and the teeth that bit down on it, was one of the worst sounds Harry had ever heard. The boy's eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his body rigid with pain, and his knuckles white over the Mark as his fingers dug into the bruised flesh.

Harry stood stunned.

Malfoy's groaning was rapidly growing into a fully-fledged desperate roar behind the twisted cloth. The sound broke fleetingly only when the boy tried to draw in a ragged breath, and then it started up again.

Harry's heartbeat was racing in his chest, his fist clenching around his wand as he looked about him despairingly for something to do. But what could he do? It wasn't like there was someone casting the Cruciatus curse that he could try and stop. It seemed likely the curse was emanating from Malfoy's Mark. How was he supposed to stop that?

Suddenly, Malfoy keeled over and curled in on himself. But it was far from over.

The strangled cries didn't stop, and Harry was just beginning to realise why Malfoy had covered the floor with cushions. The boy began writhing and squirming, his body thrusting against the cushions, scattering them until he was knocking his head and limbs against the unforgiving stone floor.

Harry threw off his cloak and rushed forward.

He lunged at the other boy, using his body weight to subdue him, and then grabbing at Malfoy's arms, he pinned them against the blonde's sides.

Harry rolled his weight off, keeping his arms wrapped tightly around the writhing boys torso, and pushed Malfoy into a sitting position. Slipping behind the Slytherin he positioned the boy's body

between his legs and pulled him back until Harry was leaning his back against the foot of the couch for purchase. He had no choice but to clutch Malfoy's back firmly to his chest, using his own arms to restrict the Slytherins movement as much as possible.

Malfoy's struggling seemed to abate somewhat at the contact, and when Harry was reasonably sure the boy couldn't do too much damage he laid his head back on the couch and wondered how long this was going to last. The groaning had not lessened in intensity, but the hoarseness of Malfoy's throat meant that it wasn't as loud, though it didn't look like letting up either.

Harry's glasses were uncomfortably skewed on his face, but he didn't dare try to free an arm to fix them, so he resigned himself to waiting it out until he could release the other boy. It was obvious that this was a regular occurrence, and the thought shook Harry. He vaguely wondered if all Death Eaters endured the same.

Harry renewed his grip as Malfoy almost managed to wrench an arm free. He looked down at what was visible of the suffering boys features. A deep line was etched between his brows and sweat was dripping down the side of his face. Harry wondered if Malfoy was aware that someone was with him or if the pain was too intense to register anything else. It was a blessing that the blonde's head didn't thrash about on Harry's shoulder, yet the Slytherins body was so taught against Harry that he wondered if this wasn't some form of Cruciatus - inflicted through the Mark instead of a wand.

It seemed like hours, but it was only about three minutes from start to finish before Malfoy's hoarse groans died off and his tense and pain racked body finally fell limp. Harry lifted his head off the couch and looked down, tentatively loosening his hold on the other boy and finally lifting an arm to straighten his glasses. He wondered briefly if Malfoy had passed out, but then the blonde head, which had lagged forward, slowly lifted and sagged back against Harry's shoulder, rolling limply outwards.

The part of the Slytherins face that Harry could see was white and clammy looking and his breaths came in shallow pants. An impatient, broken grunt sounded, and Harry moved quickly to undo the gag. But before he could dislodge himself from the Slytherin, Malfoy turned to inspect the person he was leaning against.

Bloodshot, heavy lidded grey eyes met concerned, searching, bespectacled green ones.

Malfoy groaned and closed his eyes again, croaking in a whiney voice something that sounded like "Oh no. Why did it have to be *you?*" before the exhausted Slytherin finally succumbed to enforced sleep.

Harry breathed a deep sigh and rubbed at his eyes under his glasses before pushing the frames back up his nose and letting his own head fall back against the couch.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Harry woke feeling groggy and wondering at the pain in his neck when the memory of what had happened the previous night and where he currently was drifted rudely back to him. His eyes flew open at the realisation he had carelessly fallen asleep on a couch while he'd been waiting for Malfoy to come to. He wrenched his head out of the uncomfortable position it had been lolling in only to find himself staring down the tip of a wand.

Harry blinked twice. Malfoy's pale figure came into focus.

The Slytherin was abundantly emitting cold fury as he stood before Harry's sprawled form.

"Malfoy." Harry groaned. He closed his eyes and rubbed the indents on the bridge of his nose left there by his glasses and settled back into the couch. The sickly looking boy did not respond. He kept his piercing gaze on Harry, and his wand rigidly aimed.

Lifting his arm, Harry tried to work the crick out of his neck as he eyed the Slytherin, wondering how long he'd been standing there battling with himself over whether to hex Harry limb from limb or not.

"That's not really very polite. Considering." Harry remarked, nodding at the wand. But Malfoy continued his threatening pose, making Harry feel more and more uneasy. Harry began to edge his hand around the side of the couch in search of his wand.

Malfoy followed his movements. "Looking for this?" With a triumphant glint in his sunken eyes he slid Harry's wand from his robe and dangled it between his fingers.

Harry swallowed.

"Yes. As a matter of fact." He replied with more calm than he felt. He reached out his hand slowly. "Care to return it?"

"No." Malfoy said bluntly. He pulled it away from Harry and slid it back into his robes. "I don't think so."

Harry's anger bubbled beneath the surface at the predictable answer. His jaw tightened as he decided enough was enough.

"Look Malfoy, I'm not in the mood for this. Just give me my wand." He moved to stand up, and the other boy backed up slightly. "I'm not going to attack you. I just want my wand back. You owe me that courtesy."

"I don't owe you a thing! And I didn't ask for your *interference*." Malfoy spat.

"Christ, Malfoy!" Harry exasperated. "You could be just a little bit more grateful. I stopped your bony butt from getting seriously hurt last night and I wake up with your wand in my face! I helped you and the least you can do is—"

"I didn't *need* any help!" The Slytherin growled. His knuckles whitened over his wand. "And believe me, *you* would be the Very. Last. Person. I would ask."

Malfoy sneered aggressively. "You and your sycophantic sidekicks are sickening enough from a distance without you barging into my personal space. I bet the three of you have the Slytherins vomiting en masse with your group-hugs in that hovel of a common room. Its pathetic the way you run around playing at being heroes and getting people killed. Not anyone important, of course." He ground out. "*Not anyone that actually matters.*"

"That hapless prat Longbottom, for instance." Malfoy hissed, impervious to the blood and thunder glare that Harry was sending his way. "He hung off you like a leach, but he was. Never. Quite. Good enough to join your little 'Golden Gryffindors' threesome, was he? And yet he was good enough to die for you like the willing little Mudblood-loving fodder he was." The Slytherin's face was flushed and spiteful. "Purebloods have always paid a higher price than *Mudbloods*."

Harry's fists were balled so tightly his fingernails were digging into his palms.

"The saviour of the wizarding world?" Malfoy mocked as he looked Harry up and down. "Pleeease! You're a walking magnet to misery, and anyone near you gets hurt. If you really want to help your fellow wizard then go throw yourself off the nearest—"

Malfoy was cut off by Harry's fist as it crunched into the Slytherin's cheek. The boy reeled sideways in shock, stumbling a few feet away from Harry. Harry pulled back his fist ready to punch Malfoy again if he tried to retaliate but stayed his arm when the other boy turned in a slow controlled movement to face his aggressor. Blood wept from the corner of his mouth.

Malfoy scowled as he slowly wiped at the sticky fluid. He looked down at the red smear on the back of his hand and snorted.

"I repeat. I. Did. Not. Need. Your. Help. Nor will I *ever*!" He wiped his hand on his robes, his eyes glittering with malice.

And it hit Harry suddenly why Malfoy hadn't approached him. The Slytherin *hated* him. Not just the hate that people carelessly bandy around daily. This was a deep seeded, festering hatred. Malfoy loathed him so much that he was willing to suffer torture and the threat of death rather than ask for help from the Gryffindor. The realisation was disturbing. Harry already had one deadly arch-nemesis in Voldemort. Sure, Malfoy was no Dark Lord, but he was vicious and passionate and could potentially prove a dangerous enemy – if he survived his current pickle.

Harry let out a weary breath and raked a hand through messy hair. If Malfoy wouldn't come to him, then he would go to Malfoy.

"Well I need yours."

Malfoy hesitated. "... What?"

Harry looked off to the side, finding this more difficult than he would have imagined. Not that he'd ever imagined needing to go to Draco Malfoy for help. Not for anything. It would have been a complete waist of time under any normal circumstances. Malfoy would automatically reject him, then sneer and mock him for days afterwards – perhaps even weeks. It was unthinkable.

But these were not normal circumstances.

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" Harry said under his breath. He turned his gaze back to the other boy. "I need to get into the pensieve in the Headmistresses office, but I can't get passed the protective spell."

Malfoy's eyes widened, but they quickly narrowed again. "Why are you interested in the old nags memory bowl?" He asked suspiciously.

"Dumbledore left something in it that I would like to see."

"What?"

"I don't know," Harry could tell the other boy was fishing to find out what he might know, but his impatience reflected in his voice. "I just know that its there, and that I need to see it."

"Why *me*?"

"What?"

"Why do you need *me*?" He asked, and then added scathingly. "The mudblood finally found a limit to her dazzling talents?"

"Her name is Hermione." Harry said darkly.

"Ahh." Malfoy soothed knowingly. "The task is beneath the untouchable trio. Wouldn't want to sully yourselves with any dark magic, would you?" He scoffed and shook his head slightly. "Not good enough for *you*, but good enough for *me*. Right?"

"Malfoy! Cut the crap!" Harry bit out, unable to hold in his anger any longer. "I *know* that you need access to that pensieve as much as I do. I know that what happened to you last night has been going on for some time. I know that He's hurting you through the Mark and I think I know why..." Harry's voice trailed off.

Malfoy masked the flash of vulnerability that crossed his face almost immediately. White fury took its place as he renewed the aim of his wand, and Harry wondered if he'd finally pushed the Slytherin too far.

"What *the hell* were you doing here last night? How did you get in?"

There was panic behind the ire in Malfoy's voice, and the dark rings under his eyes made them appear sunken and afraid against his pale skin. His jaw where Harry's fist had landed was quickly growing red and swollen and angry looking. Harry hesitated. He was almost certain now that Malfoy was unaware Snape had recruited him.

Harry decided on as much truth as possible. "I came in with you. I was checking the area when I heard footsteps." Harry blushed and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly with his hand. "I ... er ... fell through the door when you opened it."

Malfoy continued to eye Harry suspiciously. "How did you know I wanted to get into the pensieve?"

"Its not that hard to figure out." Harry's voice was subdued. "Makes sense in a... sick sort of way."

"What do you mean?" The Slytherin asked cautiously.

Harry sighed. "Our history is pretty much conducive to something like this, don't you think?"

Malfoy's steely glare eased slightly. Harry could guess the thoughts that were going through the other boy's head because they were going through his own at that moment.

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy had always rucked heads on everything. Whether it was in classrooms, in the halls, on the Quidditch pitch, or in the war against Voldemort, they had always been on opposite sides. Always competing against one another. What had started as nasty childish bantering had quickly turned bitter and full of malice as they grew, becoming what it was today. It was tiring, to say the least, having to watch your enemy all of the time. Harry should know. He had spent a good part of last year obsessed with Malfoy. It might have been the same this year but for the tiny issue of recovering and destroying Voldemorts soul. Piece by piece.

In the end, for one reason or another, Potter and Malfoy were continually pitted against each another. And there was no reason to believe that would ever change.

"McGonagall's out of the castle all night tomorrow."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes and lowered his wand slightly. "I heard the old battle-axe in the staff room. She's going to some ... gathering or other at the Ministry." He held Harry's wand out in resentful offering. "We can do it then."

Harry took his wand slowly, only slightly relieved at Malfoy's sudden amiable stance, knowing that as quickly as the change had befallen the other boy, it would reverse again when it no longer serviced his needs. It was a shallow reprieve. Tentative and empty.

Harry flicked his wand, summoning his invisibility cloak from the floor behind the couch. "What time should I—"

"Be here at a quarter to ten." Malfoy grumbled. His gaze shifted uncomfortably to the side. "Neophyte."

"Pardon me?" Harry asked, surprised at the uncalled for name-calling.

Malfoy huffed impatiently. "Its the password, ignoramus."

"O-oh." Harry stuttered, barely able to take in the fleeting reprieve from being insulted only to be insulted in earnest. He nodded his head once, threw his cloak over his arm, and then headed out the door.

## 26. Uncovering Draco Malfoy - Part 2

"Harry!"

As he exited the stairs from the dungeons, he looked up to see Ginny bounding down the marble stairs in the Entrance Hall. Luna was drifting along behind her dreamily. His face broke into a wide grin at the sight of his girlfriend. She returned his smile before launching herself at him.

There was something about the way Ginny hugged that warmed Harry instantly, and he buried his nose in her neck to savour the embrace. Cuddling, Harry had decided, was one of the things in life that no one should have to live without. Kissing of course was also on the list. As were many other things that Harry looked forward to doing with Ginny. But that would be after she had graduated. Harry wanted to give her plenty of time. He wanted to make sure she was comfortable and he wanted everything to be just right. Perfect for Ginny.

"Where were you all night?" She pulled back to meet his gaze. "Hermione's been chewing people out all morning! I think she's worried about you."

"I'd better skip breakfast and go on up." Harry glanced guiltily up the stairs. "I'll see you later?"

"Mmm. I'm meeting mum early." Ginny said. "She wants to have meals with the family on the weekends, so she'll be at our table when you come down for lunch." She flashed a smile and planted a chaste kiss on Harry's lips. "So where were you anyway?"

"I fell asleep." He replied a little sheepishly.

"Oh, I hope you didn't spend the night out by the lake." Luna said, widening her eyes at him. "It's the Gurglepod fondling season, you know."

"Um... No." Harry shook his head with a smile. "I fell asleep in the dungeons."

A small frown creased Ginny's brow. "That wouldn't have been much better. It's freezing down there at night now."

Harry shrugged. "It was alright. Anyway, I'd better catch up with Ron and Hermione. I'll see you at lunch?"

"Okay." She kissed again, this time lingering her goodbye, and then turned with Luna to enter the Great Hall. A few feet away, Ernie gave Harry a knowing wink and strolled off after them.

The second Harry set foot in the common room he was accosted by Colin Creevey. The sixth year slapped him sharply on the back and yelled too loudly by his ear, announcing Harry's return to everyone in the room whether they cared or not.

Harry blushed despite himself.

Pansy glanced at him with a small crease between her brows as she passed, and Blaise gave him a hesitant nod before joining her, both of them exiting the portrait hole presumably on their way to breakfast.

Harry turned to watch them depart.

It had surprised Harry when Pansy Parkinson had turned up to the first DA meeting of the term last Monday night with Blaise, and to be truthful, he hadn't been happy about her presence to begin with.

The first thing she had done was to complain bitterly about the name of the group.

She had formally proposed (and then passed her own motion) that it needed changing. Then she

unabashedly offered up "Quasi Requirers" as being a much more proactive (not to mention classier) name. The glares she had received for her trouble (the most deadly being that from Hermione) had failed to intimidate her into silence, indeed, she had continued to offer increasingly obscure 'alternatives' for the group's name. After much creasing of foreheads from the other members in the room, and snarky comments from Pansy about the "uninspired and sapless" name, Seamus had stood up, aimed his wand, and hit her with a silencing charm before Hermione (who had been steadily turning redder and was now visibly shaking) broke out of Ron's increasingly nervous hold and performed the unforgivable of her choosing on the pug-faced girl.

The name was not altered and Pansy had sulked. But as the meeting had worn on and the delegation of duties had been handed out, she had raised her arms and started waving them about irritatingly so that Harry had no other option but to remove the charm. First she pointedly scowled in Seamus's general direction and then she protested loudly (once again) because she hadn't been assigned any patrols.

On the Thursday, Pansy had taken her first shift partnered with Michael Corner. Michael hadn't been a very happy lad when they had returned to the common room, but he begrudgingly informed Harry that she had done an *annoyingly* thorough job of checking the halls.

So Pansy Parkinson, She-Slytherin and ex-girlfriend of Draco Malfoy, was now a member of the DA.

Things were definitely getting weird.

"Where have you been?"

*Hermione must be in bossy mode*, thought Harry as her voice cut through the room. She and Ron were standing in a small group of DA students crowded around a piece of parchment.

"I fell asleep." Harry said shortly. "What's this?" He asked.

"It's the new roster for 'Ginny-Minding'." Dean said wryly. "Luna and Ernie are with her until after breakfast. Then it's just me since Mrs. Weasley's here."

"I'm really grateful to you all for doing this." Harry looked at the people around him. Seamus and Dean waved their hands to dismiss Harry's thanks and Justin gave him a quick nod of assent.

"Er ... can I speak to you two for a minute?" Harry caught his two best friends' eyes. "Um ... up in the room?" They nodded and Hermione gave the parchment to Dean.

"It's each person's job to make sure the next one on the list knows. Okay?" She said. Dean nodded and Harry left for his dorm room, Ron and Hermione trailing behind.

"What's up then?" Ron finally asked as he closed the door behind them. "Is this something to do with where you were last night?" He moved to his bed and plonked himself down on the edge of it next to Hermione, picking up her hand and encasing it between his palms. Harry leaned against his bedpost.

"Yeah. There's something I have to tell you." He began tentatively. "I guess I haven't really been fair on you both to keep it a secret. I think you have the right to know. It concerns you after all. But er ... don't get mad alright? I feel bad enough for keeping it from you in the first place."

As expected, Ron's eyebrows lifted marginally, but Harry was surprised to see the colour completely drain from Hermione's face.

Mildly alarmed, Harry pulled himself off the bedpost. "Are you okay, Hermione?"

Her eyes glazed over and her fingers gripped Ron's hand so tightly, he yelped.

Ron leaned forward inspecting her face. "Hermione? What?" He placed an arm around her shoulders.

She swallowed, avoiding their gazes. "N-nothing. I-I. I'm just worried about you, Harry. That's all."

She sniffed deeply and lifted her free hand, pressing the back of it to her nose in an effort to quell the tears that were rapidly pooling in her eyes. She glanced quickly at Ron. "Y-you know what he's like." She babbled on hastily. "Always getting into trouble. E-especially when one of us isn't around to keep an eye on him."

Harry studied her fidgeting, and when she continued to avoid his gaze he moved to stand in front of her. "Hermione. What's really the matter?"

She looked at him almost pleadingly and the tears finally overflowed and spilled down her cheeks. "I jus-just worry about you. You've been through so much..." she hiccupped and stared at the hands wringing madly in her lap. "Its just not fair that it's al-always you Harry." Her voice was sounding broken and more desperate as she went on. "It-Its just... its not-not fair that it always has to be you..."

"Heyyy." Ron pulled her into a hug as she trailed off choking down sobs. He tucked her head under his chin and awkwardly patted her back. "Shh. It's alright." Her shoulders shook as she now cried freely into Ron's chest, clinging to him as he comforted her.

Harry watched on, frozen. Stunned at Hermione's outburst, which had contained rather hurtful truths.

It was like an unspoken agreement between the three of them. They didn't discuss issues that were pointless and upsetting. They didn't dwell on things that they couldn't do anything about. But suddenly Hermione was sobbing her heart out over Harry's life.

And it unsettled him greatly.

Hermione was cracking the walls of their carefully constructed damn. Chiselling at the stone that held all of the bad feelings at bay. A small leak like this could undo everything. Unleash all of the pain so carefully vaulted away and bring it cascading into the open. Harry could not deal with all of that right now. There was still more to do. He couldn't afford to be smashed against his nightmares as the damn burst. That would leave him broken and useless. He couldn't stop now.

"... Mate."

Harry blinked and looked at Ron.

Ron was watching Harry, full of concern. "She's just been working too hard." He said soothingly. "Don't take it to heart."

Hermione raised her head, sniffing and wiping at the dampness on her face. "I-I'm sorry." She said wetly. "Ron's right." Gathering herself and pulling at the last of the moisture on her cheeks she stood up and gave Harry a firm squeeze. "I'm so sorry Harry. I didn't mean what I said. Everything's fine. Really."

Harry raised his arms with uncertainty to hug her back, still feeling like he had been hit by half a dozen bludgers at once. Hermione continued to squeeze Harry for all he was worth. Then finally she pulled back.

"So." She said briskly, sliding in beside Ron again, still sniffing but looking all business. "What were you going to tell us?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "What really happened last night?"

Harry took a deep breath, trying to put the last few minutes out of his mind. "Right. Well. Like I said ... I don't want you to get angry, so I'm warning you up front you're not going to like it. Okay?"

The two of them nodded, having no other option *but* to agree. So Harry started his story.

He told them everything about Snape. About his role on Halloween and his request that it stay between them, and then he related to them everything Snape had divulged when he last dropped in on Harry. He then went on to tell them about Draco Malfoy and the previous night. By the time



Harry had finished, he had successfully fielded most of their questions. Ron's initial angry shock that Harry had been interacting with Snape proved quite disruptive until Hermione's impatience to hear the rest of the story won out. Hermione's annoyance at the risk Harry had taken fizzled too at the mention of Malfoy's mission.

Of course, they immediately informed Harry that they were accompanying him to his meeting with Malfoy on Sunday night, but Harry stopped them in their tracks. Whatever Malfoy was using to avoid detection (Hermione, suggesting it may be an invisibility cloak that was also unplottable) would prove more than adequate to escape them and Harry knew there was no way the Slytherin would go along with it if Ron and Hermione were there. Eventually it was agreed upon that Harry would go alone – if only to view the pensieve. Any further searching for the item they would do together.

Afterwards, they wandered down to the Great Hall for lunch and sat at the Gryffindor table as Mrs. Weasley, flanked by a blushing Pete on one side and Ginny on the other, regaled the other students with stories of some of her surprisingly mischievous years at Hogwarts. She was flushed with colour and had a sparkle to her eyes, and had everyone guffawing and gasping so often that even Professor Sprout, who hadn't been her usual self since Halloween, joined in.

The pudding plates had vanished long before the crowd finally broke up and Mrs. Weasley retired to her quarters with Ginny and Dean to have afternoon tea. Ron and Hermione settled on one of the common room couches by the fire with their books in hand, and Harry retreated to his bed, deciding it would be a good opportunity to catch up on some missed sleep.

As he shifted around looking for the most comfortable position for his overly full stomach Harry wondered if Malfoy had had any lunch.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

When Harry appeared in the Great Hall for dinner he was not particularly hungry, so it was a bit of a non-event. It was past seven thirty when Harry sat down at a study table in the library with Ginny to research his transfiguration homework. His full body transformations were successful almost every time now, only small details like colour or texture ever differed slightly from what he was aiming for.

Ginny flicked through her Herbology text as Harry got up and went to the shelves. He fingered along the spines and pulled out a small, soft leather book and returned to his seat. He by-passed the index and went straight to page 111.

"Why are you reading that?"

Harry looked up from the page he had previously left off. Ginny had set her book down and had her head tilted, reading the title 'Boor to Beast'. Harry shrugged.

"Just interested." He answered. "I think I would like being an animagus. It would be handy if..." Harry trailed off. He thought it would have been a great advantage if he were an auror. But he had stopped kidding himself that that was ever going to happen.

"If what?" She pressed, leaning forward.

"I don't know. I just like the idea of being able to transform into a creature, you know?"

"It'd be handy for when you're an auror too."

Harry looked back at the book. "It would still be good. Even if I can't be an auror."

"You will be a formidable auror, Harry." Ginny took the book from his grip and closed it. "You told

me once that McGonagall said she was going to help you become one - if it was the last thing she ever did." Her lips curved into an amused grin.

Harry leaned back in his chair. He sighed as he lifted his hands behind his head. "I just can't see it happening, Gin. I'm already two subjects short and the ones I *am* taking I'm so far behind in that I'd be lucky to avoid Trolls in any of them. I know she meant it at the time, but the NEWTS are only months away now."

"Harry." Ginny said. "We are talking McGonagall." As if that explained everything. "She knows that you're busy with other things. I'd bet my last knut that she has something sorted for you."

Harry smiled and leaned across the table so he was only inches from Ginny's face. "You're right. We are talking McGonagall, aren't we?" He closed the gap between them and kissed her lightly; letting his lips linger far longer than necessary. "You are a smart young lady, Ginny Weasley. Oh. That reminds me," He said, pulling back to rest against his chair again and crossing his arms over his chest. "How come you didn't tell me you did so well in your OWLS?"

Ginny's eyebrows shot up. She sat back as well, colour flushing up her cheeks. "How do you know about that?"

"Lupin told me." He frowned at her. Why was she so embarrassed?

"Oh." She said flatly. "Listen Harry. What I am about to tell you is something that I'm not at all proud of, and I have every intention of telling McGonagall too at the end of the year, but until then, I need you to keep it quiet."

Harry nodded, his frown deepening.

"Well." Ginny kept her eyes on the table. "Keeping in mind how difficult it was to sit exams last year. Well ... after Dumbledore's death, and ... everything you had to go through ... and then our break-up," She took a deep breath and let it out again as if bracing for something. "How do I say this? Oh hell. Fred and George gave me Wiz-Wonder-Mallows..." She darted her eyes up to Harry's. "And... I used them."

"They gave you what?" Harry uncrossed his arms and sat forward.

"They offered me a bunch of Weasley Wiz-Wonder-Mallows, more than enough to eat one before each OWL paper I sat, and so I did ... take them, I mean. But I haven't used any since!"

Ginny's blush renewed itself with gusto under Harry's intense stare.

"They were only trying to help," She rushed on. "And the magic was only supposed to be mild. Oh Harry, I was such a mess at the funeral after we broke up. Everything just came crushing down on me in one hit and you weren't there and Fred and George found me blubbering under the Quidditch stands and I was scared and they only wanted to help."

Ginny watched as Harry sighed, shook his head slowly and stood. Her eyes glistened with panic and moisture. She twisted her fingers together as Harry walked around the table and grabbed the chair beside her. He sat down and pulled her hands towards him, leaning in so her forehead rested on his shoulder.

"I should have known your brothers had something to do with it." He said dryly, smoothing her hair gently with one hand.

Ginny lifted her head reluctantly. "They meant well, Harry."

"So what are these Wiz-Wonder-Mallows then?" He asked quietly.

"They're marshmallows." She said. "Er ... obviously." She added at Harry's wry look. "Their magic is not supposed to help you cheat ... as such, which is why they couldn't be picked up by the examiners, they're only supposed to help you shut out everything that isn't relative to what you're doing so you can pull on everything you have learned about whatever it is you're concentrating on."

That way you're at your peak of whatever you are capable of. But... it seems that they were quite a bit more successful than expected."

"What are you going to say to McGonagall? Do you want me to go with you?"

"The truth. Fred and George insisted on coming with me too. They wanted to take the full blame but I'm the one who used them so... that wouldn't be right. Still, if I get expelled, Fred and George said they'd set me up in the old Zonko's when it's ready to open. Once the trouble dies down." She smiled, but didn't look too happy all the same. "They said it would be my place."

Harry brushed his thumb lightly on her cheek. "I don't think McGonagall would expel *anyone* for doing something out of character at the end of last year. Still, running a joke shop could be fun. You could have extra long lunches with me when I can get to Hogsmeade to visit."

Ginny beamed and raked her hand through Harry's silky black mop. "You are wonderful. You know that? Are you horribly disappointed in me?"

Harry gazed into her vivid green depths. "No." He said simply.

Their lips connected again, and Harry thought her kisses tasted like peaches and cherry blossom. They went back to studying for a couple of hours, before eventually leaving for the common room. Ginny retreated to bed and Harry glanced around at the students who were lounging around the room, finding an odd mix of Hufflepuff, Gryffindors and Slytherins, before climbing the stairs to his own room.

The social dynamics in the common room had actually settled into a less violent routine by the end of last term, and surprisingly had somehow morphed over the holidays so that it was positively *benign* at times now. Harry would never have believed it possible at the beginning of his seventh year and as he headed upstairs to offload his bag he passed by the locked doors and wondered if it was time to open them again. Strangely, no one had even requested they be opened since Halloween.

Harry decided it wouldn't be wise to fix something that wasn't broken.

He realised he was hungry as he dumped his bag on the floor by the bed. He plonked himself down and started to remove his jacket, but then changed his mind and opened the bedside draw, grabbing the purple potion of Julie's out. He held it up to the light, saw it was still almost a quarter full, and shoved the crystal bottle into his jacket pocket before heading back down the stairs. He walked over to Ron and Hermione whom he'd spotted on his way in curled up together in an oversized armchair. Ron was fast asleep with his head tilted back and his mouth hanging open. Hermione, of course, had her nose in a book.

"I'm going to the kitchens to get something to eat." Harry half-whispered once he was near them. Hermione looked up at him. "Do you want me to bring anything back?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No thanks." She rolled her eyes in Ron's direction. "I'll be doing the lockup soon anyway. Ron volunteered to keep me company so you don't have to worry about rounds tonight."

"Oh." Harry was beginning to see this thing between his two best friends might actually have fringe benefits. "Tell him I said thanks, will you?" Hermione nodded and Harry left for the kitchens.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Harry was surrounded by eager elves as he stood in the kitchen. He smiled nervously and requested a tray of left overs enough for two to take with him. His jacket pockets were being stuffed with sweets and cakes by those elves not fetching sandwiches and legs of chicken while he waited.

Dobby came out of the cluster of elves and threw himself awkwardly at Harry's leg and clung there adoringly.

"Harry Potter has come to see Dobby!" The elf squeaked as tears brimmed his enormous pale green eyes.

"Er ..." Harry said, his eyes flicking over the elf's attire.

Dobby had something that looked like a mangy dead cat on his head, a glittering silver boobtube on his torso, and a purple and yellow tartan kilt complete with sporran. His hands and feet were wrapped thickly in dirty rags and old tea towels.

"Dobby, are you okay?"

"Dobby is pleased to see you, Sir!" Dobby said wondrously as if it were obvious. Harry very gently pried the little elf off his leg and squatted as the other elves began shuffling away.

"It's good to see you too." Harry frowned. "Where's Kreacher?"

Dobby dithered, his expression turning guilty and then said barely audibly. "Kreacher is serving his false Master, Sir."

"Who is...?" Harry hesitated. "Do you mean *Malfoy*? Is Kreacher with Draco?"

The elf bowed his head. "Yes Sir." He said quietly. "Dobby knows young Master Malfoy is Harry Potter's enemy but the young Master..."

"What?"

"The young Master is fevered, Sir. He is fading. Dobby could not let him fade, Sir. The young Master was once my Family." The little elf's words tumbled over one another in his haste as he stared at his covered hands. "Dobby would never forgive himself—"

"Dobby," Harry soothed as he placed hand on the elf's skinny shoulder. "It's okay. Just tell me what's going on."

Dobby looked pleadingly at Harry. "Dobby has seen when Master Malfoy screams and burns. The young Master does not bare well the darkness in him. Dobby feels he needs to help. Dobby is letting Kreacher sneak food. But young Master Malfoy does not eat. The food comes back." Dobby's distress leaked down his wrinkled cheeks. "Says it's poisoned. Doesn't trust Kreacher or Dobby. Even the young Miss cannot help him. Dobby does not know what to do. If the—"

"Whoa... Back up." Harry interrupted. "What 'young Miss'?"

Dobby's eyes went wide in horror. "Dobby is not supposed to be speaking of that!" He breathed. The elf promptly picked up the nearest thing he could get his hands on, (a rather large old silver tea pot) and moved to bang it against his forehead in earnest, but Harry reached out speedily and grabbed it from his grip.

"Who else knows he's here, Dobby?"

The little elf hobbled on his feet, shifting his weight nervously but didn't speak or look Harry in the eye.

"*Dobby.*"

"She said she would cut Dobby's ears off and put them in Harry Potters stew if I told." He squeaked.

"No she won't. Who ever she is. I promise you Dobby. Tell me who."

The elf winced. "Miss Parkinson, Sir."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Pansy?"

"Yes Sir." Dobby squeaked urgently, and continued on hurriedly. "Dobby wanted to tell Harry Potter. Dobby punishes himself but cannot say anything. Master Malfoy has not hurt anyone else, Sir. Only himself. And Miss Parkinson made Dobby swear and she is a Mistress of Hogwarts..."

"Don't worry about it." Harry said distractedly, before concentrating on the elf again. "Dobby. You are not to punish yourself anymore. Do you hear me? No matter what happens. Do you understand? No more feeling guilty, okay?"

"Yes Sir." Dobby replied sadly.

"All right. Leave it to me." Harry said slowly and rose to stand again. "You should go and see Madame Pomphrey about those." He added, nodding at Dobby's injuries.

"Oh no, Sir." Dobby said in surprise. "Dobby is having much worse under his old Master."

Just then three elves came bustling up balancing a tray loaded with enough food for half a dozen people. Harry took off the leg of ham and one or two other things, handing them back to one of the elves with an apologetic grin, and grimaced at Dobby.

"I really think you should go to Madame Pomphrey. Maybe I should order you to go?"

"Dobby is having *un-indaba* soon."

"What's that?"

"To help, Sir. Dobby is having his *third* un-indaba." The elf fumbled with his sporren looking inordinately pleased with himself.

"Oh. Right. Er... Good." Harry said, not having a clue as to what un-indaba was but imagining it was most likely some sort of herb or potion with healing properties.

He left the kitchens carrying the tray of leftovers and headed for the dungeons.

Harry whispered the password to the stone wall, which opened into the Slytherin common room. He looked around for the reason he had come as he walked stiffly into the room, the stone wall closing behind him.

The room looked exactly as it had when he'd entered it the last time. But there was no sign of Malfoy. Harry walked over to the coffee table setting the tray down before heading towards the door he had seen the other boy emerge from. It was slightly ajar, so Harry eased it open a little more, cringing at the slight creak it made, and slipped through it. He walked lightly, not wanting to alert Malfoy to the fact that he was here until he could see the Slytherin face to face, knowing the blonde would likely don his invisibility cloak or whatever. Harry didn't want to entertain the thought of coming all this way just to get snubbed.

There were doors lining the snugly curved, barely lit passageway, and Harry gently tried the handle of each one as he went, but none opened. The corridor then curved in the opposite direction as he continued, but still no sign of Malfoy. It was impossible to see very far ahead in the 'S' shaped passageway and abruptly Harry came upon the end. The door facing him was the same as all the ones he'd passed with one exception. This door was open. A narrow plume of light splayed out from the narrow gap into the corridor.

Harry took a deep breath and pushed the door gently inwards, taking a tentative step into the room.

Then he stilled.

In his peripheral vision, he registered the blur of Malfoy standing just behind the door so he swung his head round to meet the other boy. Harry saw the flicker of relief that flashed across the pointy face.

Malfoy had his arm stretched out rigidly in front of him, his wand hovering inches from Harry's nose.

"Do you *want* to die?" Malfoy's angry voice ground out.

Harry relaxed slightly. "Stop big-noting yourself and put that wand down, Malfoy. I didn't come here to start anything." That wasn't entirely true, but Malfoy didn't need to know that.

"Why *are* you here? I said tomorrow night, moron." The Slytherin sneered.

Harry was gazing at the tip of the boy's wand, partially hypnotized as it wavered in front of his face, drifting slowly to and fro. Harry dragged his eyes away to peer at the Slytherin properly.

The first thing he noticed was that the boy's normally pale cheeks were flushed with colour. Also, his usually taugth mouth was open a small way, his lips red, wet and slack, and he had a glazed look in his eyes. His blonde hair was tussled and his clothes wrinkled like he'd just got out of bed and he was swaying gently where he stood. It occurred to Harry that the boy might really have a fever, and that the house elf hadn't just been referring to the same thing Harry had seen.

But then Harry saw the bottle clutched in Malfoy's other hand that hung by his leg. Its label indicated that it was a bottle of Ogden's Finest.

And it was three-quarters empty.

"You're drunk." Harry said flatly.

"I. Do not. Get. Drunk. *Potter!*" The Slytherin snorted in disgust. "Its for medicinal purposes." He slurred the last words.

"Right. Fine. Whatever." Harry sighed. "I've brought some food. Looks like you could do with something to eat."

"I'm not hungry. And even if I was I wouldn't take food from *you!*" Malfoy sneered.

"Well I am. So you can either join me, or watch me eat." Harry didn't wait for a response, just took out his wand and summoned the tray of food. A loud echoing clatter rang out soon after from the other end of the passage and Harry winced and waited for the probably now empty tray to reach him. It soared into view still loaded with food. Harry grabbed it and looked at it in surprise.

"I spelled the acoustics."

Harry looked at the other boy who had finally lowered his wand.

Malfoy raised a snarky eyebrow. "*You* sounded like a herd of hippogriffs." He turned away from Harry, swaggering as he walked.

The room was almost triangular and the two longer walls were lined with beds arranged in unusual ways to best fit the impractical shape. One of the smaller walls had a large iron fireplace in the middle of it with a small but comfortable carpeted area with large flat rectangular green and silver cushions surrounding it.

Malfoy set himself down on one of the cushions and leaned back against a nearby bedpost, drawing his knees up loosely and resting his wrists atop them. He lifted the bottle to his mouth and tilting his head back, tipped some of the amber liquid down his throat.

Harry followed the Slytherin and set the tray down on the floor between them, lowering himself onto a cushion and leaning against the opposite bedpost, acutely aware of the other boy's half-lidded gaze on him.

He felt thoroughly self-conscious being scrutinized and couldn't bring himself to eat, so he stretched over the tray and swiped the bottle from Malfoy's grasp. The Slytherin only watched as Harry settled back, tilted the bottle and then swallowed a much larger gulp of Firewhiskey than he'd

intended.

Harry then coughed and spluttered and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. When he looked up through watery eyes the Slytherin was smirking at him.

"Let me guess. First time?"

"No!" Harry rasped, annoyed at suddenly feeling a little bit pathetic. He took another swig to prove a point and then handed the bottle back to Malfoy. "Where did you get it anyway?"

"Unlike most students in this Palace of Pueriles, I conquered puberty long ago." The Slytherin took another swig.

Harry watched as the other boy brought the bottle to rest. "You stole it. Didn't you?"

Cold eyes settled on Harry. "It must be debilitating to be so righteous all of the time." Malfoy sneered. "I bet when you're wandering obliviously around with your head held higher than everyone else's, you're thinking about the next undeserving soul you will save."

Harry closed his eyes briefly, tilting his head back to rest on the bedpost. "I can't save anyone." He said resignedly. "As you have so thoughtfully pointed out." He lifted his head forward and raked a hand through his black mop. "I try... But it either doesn't work out ... or I make things worse."

"Then why are you here?" The other boy asked tonelessly.

The question surprised Harry. He hesitated before answering. "Well, firstly. I thought you might be hungry." The Slytherin gave a doubtful scoff. "And secondly. I thought you might want some company." Harry avoided the other boy's gaze. "Later."

Malfoy's expression went stony. "I told you." He said darkly. "I don't need your help."

"Yeah, well ... you could still have something to eat." Harry said wearily. "You look like death warmed up."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Charming."

Harry picked tentatively at the food as the Slytherin took another swig. After the first couple of mouthfuls he began to appreciate just how long it had been since he'd eaten.

"Do you miss flying?" Harry asked around a mouthful of cheese and pumpkin bread.

Malfoy looked up from watching Harry's hands at work and rolled his eyes. "What do you think?"

"I do." Harry went on, ignoring the blonde and picking up a carrot stick. "Not the Quidditch though. ...Strange that." He frowned. "I guess its because I can't really think about it right now. But flying. Just soaring through the air ... I miss that."

Harry raised his eyebrows as a thought occurred to him. "I suppose I could take the Firebolt out tomorrow. Head down to the Quidditch pitch after lunch for an hour or so..." He trailed off at the bitter look on Malfoy's face. "Sorry." He said quietly.

"Don't let *me* drag you down, Potter." The Slytherin said bitterly. "Merlin forbid if the 'Chunderous One' doesn't get to fluff about on his broomstick tomorrow afternoon."

"Do you sit around just thinking up insulting names for me?" Harry asked impatiently.

"Yes." Malfoy said proudly. "Got loads more. Want to hear them?" He asked, not waiting to hear the answer. "Let's see." He looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. "There's the 'Churlish One', 'The Bogey which Loitered', 'Chipmunk's Bum'. That's one Goyle came up with. Then there's the '*Chivalrous* One'." His voice dripping with sarcasm. " 'The Bragger that Lacked—"

"Malfoy!"

"Oh, and my personal favourite, 'The Buttocks What Loosened'." The Slytherin smirked. " That one is self explanatory *and* particularly useful. Then there's 'The Blunderer—"

"*ENOUGH!*"

Malfoy chuckled softly through his smirk.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"Potter. What are you doing?"

"Making a sandwich."

"Out of herrings and musk sticks?"

"Why not?"

"..."

"Try some."

"Do you want me to vomit up what little I *have* eaten?"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"No... Look... Juss... Give it here. You don't do it like that un-unless you want the lining of your throat dissholved."

"Malfoy. Where did that second bottle come from?"

"Now watch.....ssee? No after... ..no aft... ..no problem."

"All right. I think you've had enough. Let me try."

"I'll have you know, Potter. / will still be standing—"

"Sitting."

"What? Oh. I will still be 'sitting'... when you are l...lying in a p-hool of your own vomit."

"Thanks for sharing that image."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"...The 'Cheesey One', 'The Blemish That Lurked', the 'Chunderous One', 'The Botcher—"



"You ssaid that one already."

"...What?"

" 'Chunderous One'. Tha... that was the firss one you called me."

"Don't interrupt."

"..."

" 'The By-gone That Lingered', the 'Childish One', 'The Boy Who Blunders'....."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"Draco?"

"What?"

"I feel ssick."

"Well you should have stopped three quarters of an hour ago. When I did."

"You had a ... a head sstart."

"Of roughly three and a half years by the look of it. I thought you said you'd had Firewhiskey before?"

"I hah-ave. For medicing...medish... When I was ssick."

"Well, once you stop drinking you sober up pretty fast."

"Oh good. ...Uuuuuur."

"Do not throw up in my sleeping quarters! If you're going to live up to your pet name then do it in the bathroom."

"I think... bathroom..."

"..."

"Oopssy Daisy!"

"Oh... For Merlin's sake, Potter. Pull yourself together."

"..."

"Here. Give me your hand."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"So what happens now?" Harry asked, leaning against the bedpost. Both of them were back in their original positions after returning from the bathroom. (An experience Harry would prefer to forget.)

Malfoy sighed. "What do you mean?"

"Tomorrow night. What happens when we find what we're both looking for?"

Malfoy leaned his elbows on his knees and placed his head in his hands. His fingers scrunched through his hair. "Exactly what was always going to happen."

Harry breathed in deeply and then let it out long and slow. "I don't want to fight you Malfoy."

"It'll happen anyway."

The Slytherin glanced at the squat old clock on the mantelpiece. "Its time for you to leave."

Harry looked at the hands that pointed to a quarter to twelve and shook his head and regretted it instantly as it swam dangerously. "I'm staying."

Malfoy stood up and looked down at Harry stonily. "No. You're not."

Harry closed his eyes briefly and then picked himself up off the floor. "Here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of sweets, spilling some onto the floor.

Malfoy scowled and was about to say something when Harry finally removed the small crystal bottle of purple-black liquid. Harry held it out for Malfoy to take.

Malfoy eyed it cautiously.

"It's a healing potion. A health Tonic." Harry explained.

Malfoy shook his head. "No."

Harry shoved it into the Slytherin whose hands came around it automatically. "Take it. Seven drops with water. I've been taking it for ages and it works brilliantly."

"It doesn't look like any healing potion I know." Malfoy sneered at it. "Did you just throw it together out of scraps?"

"No, it was made by a healer in Hogsmeade. She's really gifted, Malfoy. Just... just trust me and use it."

The other boy pulled out the stopper and sniffed at it. He screwed his face up and then sniffed again. He returned the stopper and held it out to Harry with a blank look on his face.

"What?"

"I'm not taking that." The Slytherin said.

"Why not?"

"Its contains danomdipartite. Amongst other things."

"So?"

"You don't ingest danomdipartite if you like breathing." Malfoy said tonelessly.

Harry frowned and took the bottle. "...But..."

"Tomorrow. A quarter to ten. Don't be late."

Harry replaced the bottle in his pocket. "Sure."

As he headed back to the Gryffindor tower, Harry tried to think of a way that would make tomorrow *not* as inevitable as Malfoy had said. But he couldn't come up with a single way of avoiding the confrontation that would follow, if not as soon as they had seen the memory, then as soon as they found the Horcrux.

And it made Harry's already queasy stomach churn.

He didn't want to fight Malfoy. Not like this.

The arguments and skirmishes they'd had in the past were going to be nothing compared to their final battle. This time the stakes were much higher.

They were competing for the same short-term objective. *Needing* one another to achieve it, yet as always, on opposing sides.

In the end, one of them would lose everything.

And one would claim the prize.

But at what price?

Harry decided that maybe this was a game neither of them could win.

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## 27. Hermione's Parting

The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff dining tables in the Great Hall were slowly shrinking. The Gryffindor table however, seemed to be growing longer by the day. It now extended to almost half the length it was when the school had its full intake, nearly doubling in size since the beginning of the school year. Mealtimes had become a meeting place – a time to discuss anything that related to student welfare and safety along with outside happenings that threatened their world as a whole. It seemed the Gryffindor table was 'the' place to be if you wanted to know the latest happenings.

The students that belonged to the ever-increasing DA gathered at the back end of the table, while those left (mostly the younger Gryffindor students and their friends) took up the front half. Amongst the mix of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, was the odd Slytherin as well as most of the new unassigned first years who ever since the discovery of the tunnel beneath Hogwarts had developed the strategy of schooling together and hovering on the fringes of the largest crowds.

Sunday morning breakfasts were casual affairs, with students wafting in at their leisure, taking advantage of the extra hours service, and drifting off again to make the most of the free day before another week started.

Today the torches were all lit, spilling their yellowy light into the shadowed corners of the Hall as a storm raged outside. Almost black clouds brimming with violet, billowed in the magical ceiling, while outside they loomed over the castle and its surrounds, smothering sunlight and blanketing the Hall's windows so that it could have been dusk if not for the toasts and cereals lining the tables. The thunder that rolled across the ancient stonework shook the panes and hummed through the tables, making cutlery tinkle and liquids shimmy.

Harry sat staring at two runny poached eggs that trembled jelly-like on his plate.

"You look positively green." Hermione scolded over the lingering rumble.

Harry'd already explained up in the common room to a concerned Hermione before coming down *why* he was not really feeling like breakfast. At his tale of drinking half a bottle of firewhiskey with a sottish Slytherin, she had dropped the worried frown, snorted unkindly and shuffled him out the

portrait hole ahead of her. Harry had thought this a bit harsh, as he'd stumbled down the stairways and corridors dreaming longingly of crawling back into bed. When she had slid the plate containing two poached eggs in front of him just after he had sat down, Harry suspected that Hermione's sadistic streak knew no bounds in the punishment of the previously pinko'ed, since it appeared she was actually *trying* to make him vomit.

"You could've come and got me last night." Ron said sulkily. Reaching over he lifted a platter of grilled tomatoes to his plate, taking three halves off and then setting it back down again. "Best mates, Harry. We're supposed to do that sort of thing together. Can't believe you'd go down into the dungeons alone to get stonkered with *Malfoy*. It should've been me."

"Honestly." Hermione tisked disapprovingly at Ron.

Harry pushed his plate away and looked up miserably. "I didn't go down there to drink. It just sort of... happened."

Hermione turned her nose up slightly. "If you're careless enough to get yourself into this state then you deserve to suffer if you ask me."

Harry frowned at her in annoyance as she swirled honey over her steaming porridge. He was ready to admit that it *was* his own fault that his brain felt like it had turned into lead overnight, but he suspected her total lack of sympathy was for Ron's benefit more than his own. Maybe he would have to re-think the whole 'fringe benefits' thing.

"That's not very sympathetic." Ron said sullenly, tipping bacon onto his plate enough for three people.

"I give sympathy where it's deserved." Hermione said snootily. "I suppose *you* think it was funny."

"If I'd been there it would've been." Ron replied grimly. Looking at Harry he continued. "Malfoy could've been *planning* to get you drunk, Harry. Maybe he's hexed you and you can't remember it. Maybe it's got a delayed effect and sometime later on today your nose will fall off." Ron's eyes grew large as a thought occurred to him. He shoved the bacon dish onto the table distractedly, knocking over the salt and peppershakers. "Maybe he slipped you a potion in your drink and that's why you look so green. Maybe you'll go blue next because you can't breathe—"

"We drank from the same bottle Ron." Harry said calmly.

"Oh." Ron relaxed and stuffed a chunk of tomato in his mouth.

"Harry..."

Harry cocked his head at Hermione's warning tone wearily, expecting further disapproving comments, but when his gaze met hers she was glaring at him, her spoon frozen in mid-scoop. She glanced meaningfully in the direction of the front of the Hall so Harry followed her gaze. His eyebrows shot up in pleasant surprise.

Easing into a chair at the teacher's table, in between Hagrid (who was also just settling himself and when did *he* get back?) and Professor Flitwick, was Julie.

Harry's eyebrows lowered again almost immediately when he remembered Malfoy's reaction to the potion. His brow furrowed together as he reached into his jacket pocket and drew out the potion he hadn't bothered removing last night.

"Hermione? What's danomdipartite?" He asked cautiously. He hadn't told either of his friends what Malfoy had said about the potion because he didn't really know if he could take the Slytherin's word for it. After all, Julie had performed amazing healing on Harry's wounds after his run-in with Greyback. Why heal someone you're only interested in poisoning?

Hermione, who had been shooting furtive glances at Ron, just waiting for him to notice Julie, creased her brow thoughtfully for a moment before answering. "I don't know. Can't say as I've ever heard of it. Why?"

Harry leaned forward and held out the dark purple potion for Hermione to take. She frowned, set her spoon down and took the bottle from him.

"That's the tonic I've been taking that Julie gave me." Harry said. "I offered it to Malfoy last night because he looks so ill, but he gave it back to me. He said it contained danomdipartite and that he wouldn't take it because he liked breathing too much."

Hermione's eyes grew wide and Ron's fork clattered against his plate loudly where it had dropped.

"Whu?" Ron muffled out through egg and toast.

Harry shrugged in an effort to look like he wasn't that bothered. "He could be wrong. I can't imagine Julie trying to poison me slowly when she's had ample opportunity to do away with me at her place. And anyway," He continued casually. "If *you've* never heard of that stuff Hermione, then Malfoy's probably got it wrong. Maybe he was just trying to scare me?"

Hermione gave Harry a withered look. "Contrary to popular belief, I do not know *everything*. And as far as potions go, Malfoy's had enough help over the years as Snape's pet to know what he's talking about. Probably." She added. "Just because I haven't heard of it doesn't make it *not* real. It could be a substance only used in dark magic. There must be loads of ingredients used in all sorts of potions that aren't in the books we have here. I mean, look at Horcruxes. I couldn't find that in the libr—" She stopped suddenly and narrowed her eyes at the dark liquid. "...brary." She finished quietly, turning the crystal bottle around in her hand thoughtfully.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Mmm?"

"C'mon Hermione." Ron said, slightly irritated. "You always do this! You can't just leave us hanging when you've got something."

"Oh, its nothing really." She said distractedly, still eyeing the bottle. "I recently acquired some reading material that *might* help."

"Where from?" Ron asked interestedly. "I thought you said you didn't get out much over the holidays?"

"What?" Hermione finally dragged her gaze from the potion. "Oh... No. Well I didn't. Sir gave me some extra reading material." She frowned again and leaned across to Harry. "I'll see if I can find anything but in the meantime, I can give this to Meredith from the DA if you like? She helps Ginny with her Potions homework. Her parents apparently design a number of the potions they sell in their apothecaries, *and* she works in the labs with them over the holidays so she must be fairly knowledgeable." She slipped the bottle into her jacket pocket. "I really think it's worth checking it out. The meaning of the name alone makes me—"

"What the bloody hell is *she* doing here?"

Harry swung his head to follow Ron's threatening gaze and realized with a sinking feeling what his best friend was glaring at. Hermione sighed wearily as Harry brought his gaze back to meet Ron's. This was why Hermione was so anxious about Julie's presence. Ron may have forgiven Harry once they had escaped Voldemort, not surprising after what they had been through together, but he had no reason at all to make friendly with Julie.

"I have no idea." Harry replied dully.

"Maybe you can ask her." Hermione said casually, lifting a spoonful of porridge to her mouth. "She's on her way over right now."

"What?" Ron's head spun back to the direction of the teacher's table and sure enough, Julie was coasting up the aisle between the tables, heading straight for Harry. Ron narrowed his eyes and Harry slunk further down in his seat. All he needed now was for Ginny to come along to complete

this increasingly gloomy morning. A low gurgle of thunder tumbled overhead ominously as Julie stopped beside Harry, flashing all three of them a bright smile.

"Harry. How are you?" She took in his greenish pallor, knitting her eyebrows together as Harry fumbled with words.

"Er... um, good. I'm Well. Um... How are you?"

"You don't look well." Julie raised an eyebrow dubiously. She glanced at his plate of untouched eggs. "Not eating again, I see?" She rested her hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing it. "How long have you been feeling ill again?"

"Er... its nothing. Really." Harry cringed inwardly. "Its just this morning and... I'm feeling better than I did when I woke up."

"Hello."

Oh no.

Harry closed his eyes briefly at the sound of Ginny's voice.

This day, it seemed, could only get worse.

He turned reluctantly to face his girlfriend who was standing behind him.

Julie removed her hand.

Ron and Hermione watched on in awed anticipation.

"Ginny." He reached out his hand to her in a gesture he had performed many times and was mildly surprised when she smiled dreamily down at it and chuckled, placing her own hand in his tentatively, yet enthusiastically. He squeezed it gently in a reassuring way but it seemed he needn't have worried. She sat herself down demurely next to Harry, grinning at their joined hands.

Mrs. Weasley, who had entered the Hall with McGonagall, patted the Headmistress' arm in farewell and headed for Julie.

"Well now." She said, smiling kindly at Julie. "Minerva tells me you will be taking Potions for the rest of the year Julie?"

"*What?*" Harry choked out.

Hermione made a strangled noise in her throat and Ron dropped his fork again.

"Yes. That's right." Julie said pleasantly. "And I'll be teaching Healing charms in the Great Hall when time allows."

"A good thing too. Minerva knows what she's doing. Best to have even children trained these days." Mrs. Weasley then gave Ron and Ginny a pointed stare. "Both of you pay close attention to what Miss Pathet has to say. There's few better when it comes to healing charms." She motioned loosely with her hand. "These two are mine. You let me know if they give you any trouble. Ginny's my youngest, and that there's—"

"We've met." Ron cut in icily, glaring at Julie.

"Yes, we have." Julie agreed with a smile. Mrs Weasley looked surprised at Ron's obvious dislike. "Well, don't let me keep you. Have a nice breakfast Molly. Harry?" Harry rubbed Ginny's hand with his thumb before releasing it and reluctantly meeting Julie's gaze. "I would like you to stop by the potions classroom later. I'll be working in there most of the day. Anytime that's convenient for you will be fine."

"What for?" Harry asked before he could stop himself.

She had turned to leave and hesitated at his words. "Oh. Our business is of a somewhat ... personal nature."

Harry's stomach fell through the floor. It was almost as if he could feel the soil piling up around him as Julie dug his hole. He nodded nervously, ready to agree to anything so that Julie would stop talking and leave. He watched as she finally walked away, and then hazarded a look at Ginny.

His fiery girlfriend was busy arranging her scrambled eggs on her plate in the form of a face, with two huge grilled tomato-halves as eyes, a small chipolata sausage for a nose, and a crispy curved bacon strip as its smiling mouth. When it was all in place she cocked her head to admire her handy work.

"Um ... Ginny?" Harry asked hesitantly. She didn't look up immediately, just took out her wand and pointed it at the plate. Harry, Ron and Hermione all flinched expecting the food to blow up or incinerate or worse. Instead the breakfast face started chuckling. She smiled dreamily back at it and then she seemed to pick up on Harry watching her and raised her eyebrows expectantly in his direction.

"What are you doing?"

"I felt like happy food this morning." She smiled easily as if it was the most natural thing in the world to say. "Storms can be so dreary, don't you think?"

Her breakfast chuckled again and Harry couldn't stop the broad grin that crossed his face or the small laugh that escaped his lips as relief surged through him. He completely forgot that Mrs Weasley was there and leant sideways and plucked a soft lingering kiss from her lips. Ginny stayed with her lips puckered and her eyes closed for a long moment, even after Harry pulled back, as if savouring it for all it was worth. When she opened her eyes and looked straight into Harry's enquiring gaze she giggled shyly and then picked up her cutlery and stabbed one of the tomato eyes on her plate. She popped it into her mouth and chewed it with a large dopey grin on her face.

Harry smiled and chuckled softly to himself and grabbed a piece of toast from the rack, suitably relieved that Ginny seemed completely uncaring at the turn of events and feeling rather smug about Ginny's reaction to his kiss.

Hermione had watched all of this with narrowed eyes.

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"Pansy! Can I walk with you?"

Pansy was on the third floor near the transfiguration classrooms, mid-way through her rounds when Harry had finally spotted her after leaving the Great Hall. She eyed him suspiciously as he caught up with her, but didn't say anything, only continued along the passageway, her eyes darting this way and that, occasionally lifting the corner of a tapestry or poking a suit of armour with her wand to check that it sounded hollow. Harry walked beside her, watching her and thinking that she was *indeed* very thorough in her duties.

She stopped suddenly and turned her attention on Harry, her lips pouted and an eyebrow raised challengingly.

"It was that stupid elf, wasn't it?" She crossed her arms defiantly. Harry raised both eyebrows, caught off guard by her question. "It told you even after I gave it orders not to!"

"I *made* Dobby tell me." Harry said finally. "And if you seek any sort of retribution on him you'll have me to deal with. Is that clear?" He asked warningly.

She sniffed, tilting her head and looking down her stubby little nose at him. "I have no intentions of punishing him. He'll take care of that all by himself. Lucius Malfoy had him *exceedingly* well trained."

"It's a wonder Dobby feels any sympathy for people like you." Harry frowned. "After the way your lot treated him he should have been happy to leave Malfoy to his fate."

"It just goes to show then, doesn't it?" Pansy said lightly. "Perhaps you don't know as much as you think you do."

"What is there to know? Oh. Don't tell me." Harry said sarcastically. "Draco deserves Dobby's sympathy because he was always so *kind* to the house elf, right?"

"Hardly." She replied. "Draco learned from the best after all. No. He was never kind. That creature and others like it are not worth the effort of kindness. Most of them wouldn't appreciate it anyway. So why waste your time?"

"That's just wrong on so many levels. You're lucky Hermione isn't around to hear you say that."

"Like I care what that muggle thinks."

"She's a witch, just like you."

Pansy balled her fists up. "She's nothing like me – or any of the other pure-blooded witches in this school. She's never *had* to choose sides. She doesn't have to worry when she returns home that her own family might be the enemy. She won't be looking over her shoulder and wondering if her parents are looking at her like that because they suspect she's not willing to take the Mark when she graduates. She won't be lying awake at night waiting for the bedroom door to swing open with her father or brother or worse standing there in a Death Eater mask because someone has fingered you as a risk." She was bordering on hysterical as her eyes glistened with moisture.

Harry couldn't think of anything to say. Stung by her words he just stared at her as she continued.

"You 'precious ones' think everything is black and white – good and evil – and nothing in-between. Well Slytherins know better. You think we don't notice that people sneer at us just because we wear Silver and Green?" Pansy said bitterly. "Is it any wonder that we don't play nicely with the other children? We're *forced* to make choices on our own because *nobody* but Professor Snape *ever* looked out for us!"

"But M-Malfoy took the mark willingly." Harry stumbled awkwardly. "He was proud of it ... Pleased even ... I heard him on the train..."

"You heard him bragging to his peers, *Potter!* Just maybe that ridiculous little elf knows Draco a little better than you! Ask yourself why a crazy little elf like that would care about what happens to him. And while you're at it, ask yourself why Draco took the Mark so young, why don't you? But maybe you don't want to know that much about him. Maybe it's easier to keep him labelled with the tag you were so quick to slap on him in the beginning." She huffed and jutted an accusing finger at him. "I would have thought you'd have learned something about him last night."

She saw the surprise on Harry's face and dropped her shoulders exasperatedly.

"Oh of course I know about it. He didn't tell me what went on but he said you didn't fight." She let out a weary breath and lowered her gaze. "I thought maybe that would've helped you to see. Helped you to realize."

Harry worked his jaw, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. Being put in your place by Pansy Parkinson was not an experience he ever thought he'd suffer. Not knowing how to respond he decided to go on the offensive.



"How long have you known he's here?"

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Not long. But long enough."

"And yet you didn't bother to inform the DA—"

"I couldn't care less about your little vigilante group, to be honest."

Harry faltered. "Huh?"

"I'm only there so I know what's going on – that's all."

"But... you're here... checking the passageways."

"Because my darling Draco needs me to." Pansy said smoothly. "You didn't really think I was doing it for you?"

"I thought ... for the DA. For all of the students." Harry said, mildly disgusted.

"No." She said simply. "Only for Draco. He needs me to keep an eye on things while he's... indisposed."

"You know, you're not helping your case for Slytherins here. You do realize how bloody selfish that sounds! Why the hell would I trust people like you when you've got that sort of attitude?"

"You know, Draco's been close to killing you more times than you can imagine."

Harry's breath hitched at the careless ease with which Pansy spoke.

"But he's never actually *done it*, has he? Not once in the whole time he's been here has he even attacked you. He could have. Loads of times. When you were down by the lake all by your lonesome and he was standing right behind you and there was no one to see. *Even then*, he didn't *do* anything.

"My Draco is not the enemy underfoot you should be focusing on." She added snootily, not meeting his eye.

Harry's nose crinkled in question. "What d'you mean?"

Pansy sighed dramatically. "I'm not going to stick my neck out for you, Potter."

"You're in the DA Pansy." Harry pointed out. "It's not like you can hide that for long. Not now we have so many members."

"I'm not trying to hide it." She said indignantly, placing her hands on her hips. "I'm in the perfect position to spy right where I am."

Harry scoffed. "For who?"

"For either side. It's perfect." She shrugged. "It was Draco's idea, after all."

"What?" Harry blurted.

"Oh don't get your wand in a knot!" She said dramatically. "I'm not *actually* spying on you, it just looks that way. It'd be pretty thick to tell you about it otherwise, don't you think? No. This way I can be alerted to any unexpected visitors to Hogwarts and keep an eye on Bl..." Her straying eyes flashed with fear and she stopped herself sharply.

"Who? Who are you keeping—"

"Blaise!" Pansy interrupted Harry loudly, peering over his shoulder. Harry turned to see Blaise strolling up behind him.

"Pansy." Blaise said smoothly, coming to a stop. "What are you doing here still? You're going to be late for our study session if you don't get a move on." His eyes darted between the two of them in suspicion, narrowing ever so slightly.

"Oh do drag me away from this boorish Gryffindor, Blaise." Pansy sighed exaggeratedly, all traces of uncertainty gone. "Its not enough that I'm doing my share, *he* has to come up and start criticizing *how* I do it!"

"I did not—"

"Come on, darling." Pansy cut Harry's indignant denial off, grabbing Blaise's arm and tugging him along with her. "I get no appreciation, Blaise. No love." She pulled Blaise up the corridor leaving Harry staring after them in bewilderment.

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Ron accosted Harry just outside the common room as he was on his way back. Ron was carrying his winter cloak over one arm and was out of breath and mildly panicky.

"Harry. We have to go. Now." He said, grabbing Harry's arm.

"What's happened?" Harry asked quickly as he allowed Ron to lead him speedily down the stairs.

"Hermione's gone to meet him. To call it all off." He panted. "You promised we'd follow her. I don't trust him Harry."

Realizing Ron was talking about Hermione and Zach he said. "Oh." And then added. "Don't you think you're over reacting a bit?" Just then he was shoved unceremoniously into the second floor shortcut to the main stairs by a pushy Ron. "I mean Hermione's handled him pretty well so far."

"Ginny said he wouldn't let Hermione do it by owl. Kept insisting she meet him. Why?" He asked forcefully. " Why would he want to meet with her if he was going to take this well?"

They came out at the top of the marble staircase on the first floor. Harry stumbled forward as Ron nudged him out of the hidden recess. A clap of thunder crashed overhead, echoing loudly through the high ceilinged Hall.

"Well, it is a bit impersonal ... isn't it?" Harry offered calmly. "Owl, I mean. Its not exactly a 'sensitive' way to break-up, is it?"

"Harry. If it was no big deal why didn't she tell us she was going?" Ron threw Harry's coat at him and started down the stairs to the Entrance Hall talking over his shoulder. "She's too bloody proud. That's her trouble!"

Harry pulled his coat awkwardly over his shoulders as he followed.

The sky outside was deep shades of grey and purple, and hard heavy rain lashed at Harry as he closed the huge entrance door behind him. The rain did not seem to slow Ron down in the slightest however. He was racing across the grounds to the gate as if pursued by a dragon. He was already muttering the password and flicking his wand at the chains that bound the gate by the time Harry joined him.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked as they slipped through and relocked the entrance.

"The Three Broomsticks. Ginny said ... that's where she's meeting him." Ron answered breathlessly and then he disappeared with a pop. Harry sighed and followed.

He arrived outside the pub just in time to see Ron disappear inside it. Harry opened the door and entered the familiar cosy warmth already uncomfortably wet from his brief time in the rain.

Before he knew what was happening he was enveloped by a blast of hot wind that gushed and blustered all around him, taking his breath away. It stopped after only few seconds and Harry looked about him in confusion. A wrinkly old wizard dressed in shabby khaki robes sat in a padded chintz armchair near the door holding his wand in hand, pointing it at Harry. A crooked, toothless smile slanted his face as he looked at Harry's cloak.

Harry looked down and patted himself and realized he was bone dry.

The old wizard wheezed a cackle at his surprise. Harry began searching his pockets, hoping that he had some money stashed somewhere, but the wizard shook his head and poked his thumb in the direction of Madame Rosmerta.

"Taken care of, lad." He rasped. Harry nodded and thanked him and began his search for Hermione and Zach.

He spotted Ron unsuccessfully trying to 'covertly' work his way around the room. The boy knocked someone's drink all down its owner and trod on more than one foot in his 'stealthy' efforts of trying not to bring attention to himself. Harry turned away to hide his smirk.

The pub was almost full as it was near lunchtime, and Sunday lunches were always a big draw because of Happy Hour. When Harry and Ron finally stopped, neither had seen any sign of Hermione *or* Zach.

"I'll ask Rosmerta." Ron said with a worried frown. Harry nodded and Ron went up to the bar, leant over it and spoke to the innkeeper. She smiled broadly at him when she saw Ron and then nodded her head and pointed to an empty two-seater corner table. Then she shook her head and motioned to the door. Ron turned quickly and made his way back to Harry.

"They've left." He said, looking paler than usual. "They walked off without apparating."

Harry frowned. "Where would they go in this weather?"

"You tell me." Ron replied, the worry etched on his face. Harry gripped his arm gently.

"We'll find her. Don't worry. C'mon." Harry led Ron back to the door. "Hang on." He pulled up short and turned to face Ron. Digging under his cloak, he slipped his wand out of the pocket of his jeans and waved it over Ron. "Impervious Charm." Harry explained, and then turned the wand on himself. He waved it and then slipped it back under his cloak. "Let's go."

Once back out on the street they decided it would be better to split up and cover more ground faster. Harry headed out towards the Shrieking Shack with the aim of circling round to meet Ron back outside the pub in twenty minutes. As he trudged along in the rain, which fell all around him and not on him thanks to the charm, he began to worry in earnest.

Why would Hermione leave the comfort of The Three Broomsticks and come out in this? She was far too sensible a girl to do something like that lightly, so what had brought her out here?

A sudden gust of wind whipped his coat up, and Harry shivered. Partly from the cold blast, but mostly because Ron's foreboding intuition about Hermione's break-up with Zach was now creeping through Harry's veins like ice.

Harry quickened his pace, scanning the cobbled streets carefully. Lightening forked across the sky as he neared the edge of town and a clap of thunder broke loudly above him. Harry's worry was turning to dread as the minutes ticked by with no sign of Hermione. It was possible that she had already returned to Hogwarts, but something told Harry that she hadn't. That she was out here somewhere and in need of him and Ron. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a flash of light somewhere in the distance to his right. It was low on the horizon, rising above the housetops instead of illuminating the sky.

Harry broke into a run.

He circled the last house at the end of the street before the forest took over and bolted down the path that took him past trees on one side and streets on the other.

Another flash of light rose from the trees ahead.

Harry clumsily dug for his wand under his cloak, but it was impossible to get to it under the heavy garment unless he slowed down or stopped. Another flash – this one green – and Harry abandoned his try for the wand and broke into a sprint.

As he neared he could make out three figures draped in black standing around another slumped body on the ground. Harry tried to pull up before he ran straight into them and gave himself away but skidded on the muddy sopping grass and slid along the ground on his hip before finally coming to a halt in a bush.

He scrambled to pull his wand out and get up at the same time but he slipped again, nosediving into the mud. He swore loudly in frustration and ripped at his cloak. It fell away as he stumbled to his feet, his hand swiftly grabbing his wand from his jeans. The impervious charm had dissipated on contact with the ground when he had fallen and the rain pelted into his lenses obscuring his vision. The figures ahead were a blur, but he could make out one of them lifting the limp body off the ground. Harry pushed forward and fired a stun that hit his target, flinging the Death Eater backwards and sending the body in his arms flying.

Another figure with light coloured hair was screaming at Harry and pointing frantically. Then spells were being flung at Harry from an impossible number of directions as he tried to turn. Unable to do anything else, he launched himself onto the ground, ducking the ribbons of light that laced above him. Some hit surrounding trees and exploded, sending splintering wood showering down on Harry. But he didn't have time to worry about the sudden stabbing pain in his shoulder. He clawed his way off the ground again and scrambled towards the body that had been thrown clear by his stun, when suddenly something brought him crashing to his knees. Collapsing under an enormous weight Harry was pushed forward and pinned flat to the ground. All the air left his lungs under the crushing force and specks of light darted into his eyesight as he slowly and painfully lifted his head.

Voices muffled by the storm exchanged unknown words around Harry's prone form. He realized he was only meters from the Death Eater he had knocked out with his stun as several pairs of black boots crossed his field of vision, slapping in the muddy, rain soaked grass. The Death Eater was beginning to slowly and stiffly pick himself up off the ground, and only a short distance from him was the limp body he had been holding. This close Harry could see the sodden and muddied long brown hair and Weasley jumper poking through the torn cloak.

"Hermione."

It came out as barely a whisper and Harry's heart clenched and ached and suddenly everything felt wrong.

He gritted his teeth, putting everything he had into moving. To getting up and going to her anyway he could. He tried to push up, but even though his arms were right there on the ground either side of his head his brain couldn't seem to find them to use them and as he strained, blackness swamped the edges of his vision threateningly. He ignored the warning and summoned every nerve and muscle he could to get on his feet, but his arms still didn't move and with dawning understanding, Harry realized couldn't even feel his legs.

The blonde who had been screaming at Harry was lying on his back in the mud a few feet away with his arms folded over his face and weeping whole-heartedly. Then his arms dropped away as he rolled onto his side and hugged himself, curling his knees up tightly into his chest.

Zacharias anguished eyes closed tightly as he continued to sob.

Harry's neck burned with the strain of keeping his head up but he had to watch. He had to.

The Death Eater in front of him had finally found his feet and was walking the few paces to Hermione's still form. He bent down to gather her up and as he slid his arms under her body his now unmasked face came into Harry's limited field of view.

Harry roared in frustration and fury, but with next to no air in his lungs all that came out was an inaudible groan, smothered by the pounding, relentless rain. Harry watched, unable to do anything as Snape lifted Hermione and then turned to face the other Death Eaters. He said something Harry couldn't pick up and then Harry felt a pull, and sharp searing pain forked through his right shoulder. He tried to respond but all that came out was a broken grunt.

He was rapidly losing his battle to stay conscious. His eyes dropped closed as his head sagged.

The voices were talking again but were interrupted by a loud yell that came from somewhere in the distance.

Snape barked out an order and Harry heard several loud cracks and he knew beyond a doubt, without having to look, that Hermione was gone.

Zach's wailing sobs droned on relentlessly and then Harry heard Ron's voice calling to him.

Harry clinged to consciousness.

He had failed Ron. He had failed Hermione. He'd let them take her and he wanted to tell Ron how sorry he was. How desperately and sickeningly sorry he was.

The pain seemed to be growing in intensity as he tried to draw breath.

His head finally dropped cheek first back into the mud, the strength to hold it up no longer in him. Ron yelled his name frantically again, sounding almost on top of him, and then ... a hand touched his face hesitantly.

Harry dragged his eyes open and met Ron's pale, strained and scared face looking down at him.

"I'm so sorry." Harry breathed.

Then he sank into darkness.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

## 28. Revelations

Harry didn't feel like moving and he wasn't really sure if he was awake, asleep or dead. He seemed to be lying on a cushioned surface on his stomach and his cheek was pushed into what could have been a pillow. Jumbled up nightmare images flashed through his head as grim murmurs slowly drifted into his hearing.

"...Poppy. Are you saying that the sap was trying to liquefy his muscles?"

"Nasty stuff Minerva, and hard to recognise according to Professor Sprout. The Eucapatholyptus looks exactly like a harmless Blood-wood. I dread to think what would have happened if she hadn't been up here when he was brought in."

"How did Pomona know what it was?"

"One of the two fellows that helped Mr. Weasley bring him back'd already removed quite a vicious curse that had Potter pinned to the ground, but nothing he cast helped Potter's paralysis. When I asked about the wound in his shoulder the Professor noticed the splinters in his clothing. He was hardly breathing by then."

Harry tried to open his eyes as the murmuring voices echoed over him lingeringly, but nothing happened. Not even a fluttering of eyelids.

"The shard entered his shoulder... just there. See? It was pulled out rather roughly going by the tear, though nobody seems to know by whom. If it'd stayed in there any longer he would have been beyond my aide. He will need complete bed rest, of course. For the next few days at least."

"You are aware of how difficult that will be under the circumstances?"

"Mm, yes. Unfortunately I am quite well acquainted with Mr. Potter's... determination."

Groggily, Harry tried to move, to roll over in an effort to ease the ache in his limbs, but it wasn't just his eyes that didn't work. Not even a finger lifted off the bed.

"How long will the antidote take to work through his system?"

"He'll be a bit wobbly on his feet for a time, but he's breathing normally already. He should be able to make it to the bathroom and back but not much further than that for a few days, I'm afraid."

"What about Smith?"

"Heavily sedated until we can get two coherent words out of him." Harry felt the mattress lift slightly on one side as a sheet was drawn up and tucked in. "The Ministry's hounds will be back tomorrow to question him fully. Its hard to believe a young man like that would lead poor Miss Granger into..."

"Yes. Well we do not have all the facts yet, Poppy. I imagine there is more to this than what Mr. Weasley has so far informed."

As thoughts of Hermione bombarded him, Harry tried to push out some of the sickening pressure building in him. It would likely come out as an awful groan and Harry wouldn't have cared. Any sound would have been a release, helping him to escape this waking prison he found himself in. But nothing, not even a whisper passed his lips. His whole insides were swirling with anger, frustration, and sorrow slowly rotting inside him.

"I would have worried about Smith's safety tonight except for the fact I gave young Ronald something to calm him before I sent him off as well. I've never seen a student look so murderous—"

"Thank you, Poppy. I believe Mr. Weasley was ... very close ... to Miss Granger. She was ... an exceptional ... young woman."

McGonagall's voice sounded strangled and Harry started to lose grip on whatever it was that had woken him.

"I must be going, Poppy. I do not like to leave but some things will not wait. ... I will notify the Grangers ... before I leave for the Ministry. You will be able to handle things here until I return?"

Harry registered McGonagall's anguished tone at contacting Hermione's parents and guilt forked through him like lightening. It was his fault she was gone. He had been so busy worrying about Ginny being a target that he had neglected to watch out for his other two highest priorities. Ron and Hermione. His Hermione. And now she was gone. Sweet kind compassionate lovingly loyal impossibly bossy and always right Hermione.

Best friend for ever Hermione.

How could he have let this happen...

"He's out of danger Minerva. Don't worry, neither of them will be going anywhere this evening."

Harry no longer wanted to hold on. To think about how she had slipped so violently away from him. Because of him. He let go and felt himself fall. Footsteps faded into nothing.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

... Potter ...

Harry was dreaming of rain. So much rain, that he could no longer see the ground, just a dark ocean and grey storm clouds. The murky water pooled around his thighs as large blobs continued to fall. The droplets dented the surface causing rippling ringlets to expand and collide in a never-ending cycle. Harry wondered if he too was made of water.

The tips of his fingers swirled lazy patterns through the spitting swelling, volumous surface, as he stood not moving, just watching the water rise. He thought about how peaceful it would be to just stand there and let the water keep coming. To let it swathe him. Envelop him.

He watched as it bloomed higher and higher. Maybe when it covered him completely it would finally shut out the awful sobbing that persistently echoed around him.

"...Potter..."

Harry ignored the intruder to this grey, wet and empty place where he didn't have to think about anything except the rain.

Warm wet salty rain.

He lifted his face to the weeping haze and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of the water seeping up his body. It was up to his elbows and he let it keep coming. Willed it to come.

As the rain sprinkled onto his face he slowly became aware that he was leaking. He looked down and saw salty water seeping through his shirt and running in rivulets down his chest. At the same moment ... he realized the incessant sobbing had stopped.

"Potter!"

Harry opened his eyes. The second he did he wished he had let the water take him. He was lying on his back in the comfort and safety of the dimly lit hospital wing at Hogwarts and it was wrong. It was so wrong. Like everything since... since...

He closed his eyes again and sucked in a breath.

"Don't you *dare* go back to sleep!"

Harry knew that voice and the acidic tone with which it spoke.

"Sod off Malfoy." He croaked as he rested an arm over his eyes.

"Oh. No. You. Don't!"

The blanket that was covering Harry's only half pyjama clad form was yanked off the bed and the cool night air settled on him like a cold hand across his chest. Stiffly Harry rolled onto his side and curled his knees up.

He had no idea how the Slytherin had got into the hospital ward, and didn't care to know, but he did know *why* the other boy was there, and Harry found he no longer cared about that either. He closed his eyes to the outside, unconcerned if he never opened them again.

"Potter. Get up!" Malfoy whispered hoarsely as he walked around the bed until he was standing in front of Harry.

Harry ignored the Slytherin but Hermione's accusing, lifeless form seemed burned into the back of his eyelids and with a sinking feeling, he decided he couldn't look at it anymore. He opened his eyes slowly, scowling at his own cowardice, and stared blankly at nothing in front of him.

An impatient huff came from Malfoy. "It's already past ten. We have to get moving."

Harry didn't move.

Nothing he did made anything better. Maybe if he stayed here and didn't move at all then his friends would be safe. Maybe if he stayed here long enough he wouldn't have any friends to worry about keeping safe.

Maybe *then* no one else would have to die.

One of the hospital wings metal chairs was scraped noisily into view. Malfoy then threw an invisibility cloak over one of its arms and dropped into it. He lifted a knee to rest his foot up on the edge of Harry's bed before sprawling back and raking a hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. He was quiet for a moment before letting out a deep sigh. Harry's gaze was drawn to him long enough to take in the Slytherin green pullover and black pants the boy was clad in and the weary, uncertain look on his face. Harry looked away to stare at nothing again.

"I hope this isn't going to take long." Malfoy deadpanned. "I have plans at midnight."

Harry almost closed his eyes again at Malfoy's attempt at humour. But the fact that the Slytherin tried to make light of the pain the boy suffered nightly only tugged at the pit of his stomach. Only the thoughts of seeing *her* again kept them open. He was so tired of the pain – of his own, and of everyone else's.

"Look." Malfoy sighed again and looked up at the ceiling uncomfortably. "Neither of us is any good at this Potter. So why don't we skip the part where I act convincingly like I care, bypass the whole woeful outpouring of Gryffindor sentimentality that, Merlin forbid, we both know I don't have a hope of tolerating without taking the mickey, and *you* just come right out and tell me exactly what it'll take to get you off that bed and out of the dump of self pity you are currently wallowing in. Because – quite frankly – it's boring and it's selfish and I don't have the bloody time for it."

Harry should have felt mild shock and would normally be affronted at Malfoy's words, and yet he remained unmoved. It was going to take a lot more than Malfoy's lack of tact to pierce his numbness.

It must have become clear to Draco that Harry had no intention of continuing on with their plans tonight, because the Slytherin's casual façade shattered suddenly. He kicked out his foot; jarring the bed Harry was lying on and sending his chair skidding backwards. Harry was jolted out of his reverie while Malfoy leapt to his feet and lunged forward, grabbing Harry's arm and yanking the wary-eyed Gryffindor up to bring their faces within inches of each other.

"You pick tonight of all nights to give up!" Draco hissed through his teeth. He searched Harry's face impatiently and then tightened his grip. "I know what you need Potter. Revenge."

Before Harry could gather his wits he was thrust backward onto the bed again. Malfoy turned and stalked away. Harry lifted himself onto his elbows with difficulty, still incredibly stiff and sore from the poisonous sap and watched as the Slytherin stopped beside a bed some way down and opposite. The angry blonde drew his wand and pointed it at the unconscious sandy haired Hufflepuff that lay oblivious in the sheets.

"*No!*" Harry croaked out, not at all certain what Malfoy had in store for Smith. He thought he ought to keep the seething Slytherin from doing something that Harry would surely regret.

Malfoy looked over his shoulder disgustingly at Harry. "He has to pay for what he did. It's the only way you'll be free of that pointless and emasculating guilt that you're infested with." The Slytherin reached forward and grabbed a fist full of Sandy hair, yanking the other boy's head up so he was in a sitting position. He snarled at Harry. "And if you won't do it, I will. I need you on your feet



tonight, Potter. I cannot afford you to be weakened by self loathing and pity."

Then suddenly a yellow flash darted from Malfoy's wand and Smith gasped in a breath of air, clutching at his chest, his eyes remaining eerily closed.

Harry swung himself onto the side of his bed, ignoring the sharp pains coming from his stiff limbs. "What did you do?" He demanded.

Smith sagged again, the weight of his torso only being held up by Malfoy's grip on his hair.

"A little pick me up. Guaranteed to break through most common sedatives." Draco eyed Smith with interest. "It's a tad painful, bit of a shock to the system, but nothing a pure-blooded traitor like Smith here couldn't handle." Malfoy pulled Smith's head up higher and grinned malevolently as it hung forward. "Dear oh me, some people just can't get up in the mornings."

Before Harry verbally protested, he was wincing at the effects of another yellow flash Malfoy sent Smith's way. Smith's eyes flew wide open and he drew in a rattled breath that sounded like it could be his last, his arms still clutched at his chest. Harry suspected the only thing keeping Smith from falling backwards onto the bed was Malfoy's unyielding grasp of his hair.

"Malfoy! Let him go." Harry ground out, finally managing to work his way off the edge of the bed onto his feet.

"You don't need to worry about being found out. I put a silencing charm on the doors when Poopy Pomphrey left. Oh Come on Potter. You know what he did as well as I do. I was here when they were trying to mend you. He's a traitor. A blood traitor but also a double-crosser who betrayed his own side – hell, his own girlfriend – at the first sign of trouble." Malfoy yanked Smith's head back so the boy's face was tilted towards him. Smith was panting and dazed from his rude awakening, and growing more frightened by the second.

Malfoy's lip curled dangerously in distaste as he moved in closer to the scared boy.

"Do you know what my side does to traitors?" The Slytherin's voice hissed dark and threatening. Not waiting for an answer he continued on slowly, relishing the other boy's fear. "They peel the skin from your body, layer by layer, magically so you don't pass out from the pain and horror, and then they just walk away and leave you." Malfoy moved his head round so he was speaking with soft venom into Smith's ear. Zach was shaking so badly the metal bars on the bed were rattling. "Do you know why? Why they don't torture you further? Because skin is the body's largest organ, and when it's simply taken away, all of your other organs begin to shut down from shock."

A change was slowly coming over the Slytherin as he spoke. The malicious bravado was gradually being overcast with repulsion. "They say you can feel your outer flesh shrivelling as it dries out. But not the face. A lipless mouth tends to drool rather a lot, and the salt in the tears that leak from raw, sagging eyes, burns like acid as it drips. It's slow and agonizing... And the worst suffering you can imagine before you die..." Malfoy's expression was laced with pain and bitterness as he trailed off.

Smith let out a whimper and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Clear wet drops fell down his flushed and anguished cheeks.

"Malfoy. That's enough. Let him go." Harry said croakily under his breath, sickened by what he had just heard.

Malfoy glanced round at Harry and then back at the pitiful Smith and then he finally let the boy go, his sneer plastered back in its usual place. Harry rested his full weight on his feet and stood for a moment to get his balance. He took a tentative step to the bedside cabinet and grabbed his glasses before pushing them up his nose and picking up his wand, feeling somewhat more secure in Malfoy's presence now it was in his hand. Then he turned slowly and began lifting himself back onto the bed.

"What the hell are you doing? Why are you getting back into bed?"

Harry sighed and without meeting the incredulous stare he was sure to be getting from Malfoy, he

rearranged the bed covers and settled back against the propped up pillows.

"Potter!" Malfoy spat. "Did I not make myself clear? Shake off this quagmire you're stuck in and hex Smith until he's the slobbering blob he deserves to be and you feel better. Then we can go."

Smith made a keening noise.

"I'm not going anywhere Malfoy." Harry pushed his hands up under his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "Don't you get it? Hermione's... They're all dead or dying, and I don't want ... to *know* about it anymore. I don't want to... to be the cause ... anymore."

Zach started mumbling incoherently in the background, rocking back and forth on the bed, clutching at himself as Malfoy advanced on Harry.

"You are a part of this whether you want to be or not. You always have been and always will! And you're not the only one so stop being so weak and pathetic." The Slytherins face twisted angrily. "You should count yourself lucky! Not all of us have a Secret Society and Ministry officials covering our backs. I haven't exactly been served a dish full of dancing Veelas either. But did I give up when..." Malfoy stopped and struggled to get the words out. "When my mother died."

Harry recognized that Malfoy wasn't associating his mother's death with the truth. Murder by Voldemort. Maybe that's how he managed to still serve his Dark Lord.

"Of course not!" The Slytherin continued. "And you. You're The Chosen One." He mocked with his lip curled. "Oh... but of course. How terribly insensitive of me. It must be insufferable to have a world full of hero worshippers fawning all over you and jumping to your every need. Over protective mobs racing you off to the hospital wing whenever you do no more than stub your big toe. It must be the *absolute pits* to have a world of people at your fingertips ready to help you – fight for you – take you in and..." He mouthed without sound for a moment in search of more words and then said even louder. "The difference between you and me is that they mistakenly see you as the saviour of the wizarding world, while its people like me that are really trying to preserve it!"

Zach gave another whimper at Malfoy's raised voice and continued to murmur something over and over again that neither of them could understand. (Not that they were listening. They had both sunk into eyeing each other off challengingly like they had habitually ended up doing since they were eleven years old.)

"One day they'll understand." The Slytherin narrowed his eyes, his passion clearly visible. "One day they'll see what it means to allow fools like Dumbledore to make the rules. Muggles will *never* accept wizards. They fear our magic, they fear our spoken word, and they even fear that we live longer than them. Its jealousy – nothing nobler – and muggles destroy everything they fear and envy. If we don't do something now there'll be no more wizards left to—"

"PUT A CORK IN IT MALFOY! ARE YOU SERIOUSLY SAYING THAT THAT CRAZED PSYCO TOM RIDDLE – THE ONE THAT PUTS YOU THROUGH HELL NIGHT AFTER NIGHT – IS YOUR ANSWER?" Harry's outburst had surprised even himself, but he was so sick of hearing Malfoy's oblivious hypocrisy.

"He's the only one powerful enough to do anything about it." The Slytherin said quietly, avoiding Harry's glare. "I trust Fathers judgment."

"This would be the same Lucius Malfoy that placed a dangerous book into eleven year old Ginny Weasley's hands – a pureblood remember – so that the entire 'impure' student body could be systematically wiped out? Only she told Riddle about me, didn't she? And in his infinite wisdom he was no longer content to just lie and manipulate Ginny and kill hundreds of kids – sorry – *mudbloods*. He abandoned 'the noble cause' for consuming her soul, leaving her for dead so he could have another go at me, a near-powerless twelve year old, all because he learned I had somehow almost killed him when I was one." Harry watched as Draco's expression faltered into an uncertain frown. "Funny how he can ignore his 'noble calling' without a second thought when he thinks his own existence is under threat."

Harry had Malfoy hooked. The Slytherin was listening in spite of himself. Harry continued, taking full advantage of the moment.

"I don't imagine he looks too kindly on his Death Eaters valuing their own lives as much. It's probably in some Death Eater handbook somewhere that you have to sacrifice yourself 'honourably' for your fellow pure-blooded comrades future glory. Still, I suppose it makes sense that Voldemort wouldn't have to hold to that – having a muggle father and all." Harry heard the hiss from Malfoy but continued on as if he hadn't. "Of course Voldemort would *like* everyone to believe he's warring for pureblood supremacy, but that's hardly likely since he's a halfblood, don't you think? But your father must know all about it. He wouldn't be gullible enough to commit his whole family into the service of the darkest wizard of all time without being certain of Voldemort's agenda. Your *father* is surely smart enough to know the real reason Voldemort needs his Death Eaters."

Harry's gaze drifted over Malfoy's decidedly pale face. The Slytherin was frowning in quiet fury and confusion, reflecting his inner turmoil as he stewed over what he had just been told. It was almost enough to make Harry wish it wasn't too late to care whether or not he'd made a difference.

"Anyway." Harry said resignedly, pulling the blanket back around him. "You'll forgive me if I don't want to hear any more of your Death Eater 'Youth Training'. I don't care about any of it anymore."

This seemed to bring Draco out of his thoughts. He narrowed his eyes and sneered. "Of course you care... or you wouldn't be behaving like such a coward!"

"What?"

"You finally lose someone close to you and you-you can't stomach it anymore!"

"F-Finally? ..." Harry blustered in disbelief but he was not prepared to get into the long list of people he'd lost so he went on the attack. "Hermione's dead you sodding insensitive prat! DEAD! She died because I couldn't save her!" Oh no no no no no... Harry could feel the salty sting prickling at his eyes and he did *not* want to do this in front of Malfoy. He whipped his glasses off and lifted his palms up to his eyes. He was not ready to open these floodgates. Maybe he would never be ready. Maybe if he started crying for Hermione, he'd never stop. Just drown in the tears like in his dream.

"It's always the same story with you, isn't it Potter? *Oh what?*" Malfoy bit out impatiently over his shoulder as Zach's mantra became more urgent. "What are you on about Smith?"

"She's not d-dead."

The Slytherin turned to face the distressed Hufflepuff. "The mudblood?"

Harry dropped his hands away from his face where they had been pressing in violently in an effort to hold back his grief and stared at Zach.

"Sh-she's not dead." He stumbled out. "Just ... knocked out."

Harry slipped off the bed and began walking stiffly towards Zach, barely even registering the pain caused by his movement. "But... but there was a green light. The killing curse ... I saw it."

"Snape." Zach sobbed as Malfoy approached, watching on in interest. "One of them went to fire the k-killing curse... *at me* ...and he shot the wand out of their hand... just in time. It barely missed me."

"Snape did that?" Malfoy demanded, frowning intently as the other boy nodded. "How do you know it was him?"

"I didn't – not for certain – until his mask came off when Harry hit him with a stun."

Malfoy didn't let up, now seeming as interested in what happened as Harry, who was temporarily struck dumb, afraid to speak in case Hermione's reprieve was broken.

"So Snape didn't kill Granger but he took her with him?"

Zach nodded at Malfoy and wiped the back of his pyjama sleeve across his wet face, sucking in air to catch his breath. "He stunned her. Knocked her out. He wouldn't tell me why he wanted her, just-just that I had to do as I was told or they'd come for my family next."

"How did you get her out of The Three Broomsticks?" Harry asked grimly in a sudden need to know the details. He finally allowed a tentative relief to wash through him.

The Hufflepuff had the decency to look ashamed. "Snape appeared at my house a week ago. He said they knew about our relationship and that I was to insist on meeting with her to break it off. Then he gave me something to put in her drink – a Confundus powder I think – and told me to lead her to the forest out by Shady Lane."

Malfoy was now level with Harry and both of them were frowning intently at Smith, and going by the panicked glint in Zach's eye as he flicked his glance between the two young men, they must have looked a formidable pair standing side by side united against a common enemy; Zach...

"Er... ak!" Zach shrivelled back under their heavy gazes into the headboard with his knees hugged protectively to him and began twisting his hands and mumbling under his breath that they couldn't harm him for trying to protect his family... no way, Of course not... They wouldn't...

"Well." The Slytherin said with bright impatience. "Now there's no excuse, Potter." He lifted his wand and flicked it carelessly at Zach. The boy's eyes rolled back in his head and it flopped back with a hard thump onto the headboard, passed out cold. "Can we go now?"

"What did you do that for?" Harry asked angrily, eyeing the unconscious Hufflepuff.

"You don't want him to know what we're up to do you?" Malfoy said, dismissing Harry's concern with a wave of his hand. "Besides, if he was awake he'd be calling Madame Pomphrey in here demanding room service and then we'd have to deal with her too."

"You know, you wave that thing at people way too casually for my liking. Have you ever tried talking to people, reasoning with them?" Harry asked, eyeing the Slytherin's wand warily as he headed in search of his clothes.

Malfoy looked surprised as he raised an eyebrow. "Reason with them Potter? Why on earth would I bother? We're finally going then?"

Harry nodded and delicately picked up his jeans, wincing at the sharp pain in his neck and arm and leg and ... well pretty much everywhere. "I have to make a stop on the way though."

"What? No! There isn't time." The Slytherin protested.

"I'm not leaving Ron believing Hermione's dead. So save your breath. We see him first – then we'll go to McGonagall's office." Harry held up a hand as Malfoy opened his mouth scowling. "And turn around so I can get changed."

The Slytherin's expression suddenly changed and gone were any traces of anger and impatience. He lowered himself onto the edge of Harry's bed looking in the opposite direction and plucked at the corners of the pillow lightly. "You could give me the passwords we'll need up there then I could get started while you're busy petting a morose and leaky weasel." (He shuddered)

Harry sent the back of the blonde's head a warning look and started awkwardly dressing. "We're going together – or not at all." He warned the Slytherin grimly. There was no way he was going to let Malfoy loose in the Head's office to pick his way through Dumbledore's pensive and precious memories. Who knows what he's left in there?

"Just a thought." The Slytherin answered casually, yet there was a vague undertone of defensiveness. Harry frowned to himself. Surely Malfoy didn't think that the last two days changed everything between them? Certainly they had seen another side to one another, but ultimately, neither of them was about to change who they are – Malfoy least of all. Harry only had to see him with Zach a moment ago to know that.

It was slow and painful going for Harry trying to get up to the Gryffindor tower. Malfoy seemed twitchy and agitated at the amount of time that was passing, knowing he was going to have to get back to the Slytherin common room before midnight. Although the fact that they were both squeezed under Malfoy's invisibility cloak, unavoidably rubbing shoulders and thighs in an effort to stay hidden could have been said to antagonize the blonde further, it wasn't doing much for Harry's comfort either.

Malfoy stopped grumbling and kept his mouth shut while Harry poked his head out at the Fat Lady. Tapping his wand on her frame a couple of times to wake her up, he gave her the password and speedily grabbed the frame as it swung open before the tired pink-clad woman dropped off again and it closed leaving them still on the wrong side of the door. Once inside and surrounded by the deep reds of the furnishings and the golden glow from the lamps and the fireplace, Harry breathed a sigh of relief and took a quick look around. Seamus and Dean were sprawled on the large couch before the fire and Pansy was huddled in a secretive chat with Crabbe and Goyle in what had unofficially become the Slytherin corner of the common room.

Harry slipped off the cloak carefully; expecting Malfoy to stay covered and made his way over to Seamus and Dean. They both wore the same punctured expression that went with their deflated bodies. They looked up as Harry eased himself up to lean on the couch. The walk had left him feeling very wobbly indeed and he was glad to have something to rest against.

"You shouldn't be here." Said Seamus in concern. "You look bloody awful."

Dean wriggled forward into an upright position so he could see Harry better. "Seam's right. You look like the walking dead. You should be resting back in hospital. There's nothing you can do up here, mate."

"Listen." Seamus began, a sombre tone to his voice. "We really don't know what to say..."

"Yeah." Dean's voice cracked and his eyes looked excessively watery. "I still can't believe it, you know?"

"Ron." Was all Harry managed to croakily get out before Seamus jerked his thumb up the stairs.

"He's in the room, with Ginny."

"He's taken it pretty bad." Dean added cautiously. "He needed company, but not the sort me or Seamus can give, so we're dossing down here for the night. Ginny's taken your bed."

Harry nodded at Dean and let go of the couch, swaying and shaking as he turned and made his way to the stairs.

"Harry."

He tossed a look over his shoulder at Dean.

"You really ought to go back to Madame Pomphrey's mate. There's nout you can do and you don't even look like you'll make it up the stairs."

"Of course he will." Came a clipped voice. They all turned to see Malfoy who had discarded the cloak and had been huddled with Pansy and co. He was straightening from the table and heading over to Harry with raised eyebrows. "I can levitate you if you like?"

Not on your life!

"Er... um... no, really. I'm fine. Really." Harry couldn't imagine anything worse than being at Malfoy's mercy at the end of his wand. If anything clarified what sort of relationship the two boys had in the

last few days, it was Harry's unwillingness to trust Malfoy as far as he could safely toss a fully-grown blast-ended Skrewt.

Malfoy smirked as he joined Harry at the foot of the stairs. "You Gryffindors are supposed to be all trusting and noble, aren't you?"

"Trusting and noble, we are." Harry said as he started the agonizing ascent. "Blithering idiots, we're not."

"Doesn't say much for our new found friendship, now does it?" Malfoy cocked an eyebrow and placed a hand under Harry's arm to help propel him along a little faster.

"Speaks volumes really." Harry replied without meeting the blonde's eye as he limped and winced his way along. "It might surprise you to learn, considering you see me as some dopey senseless underachiever smothered by a hero complex with no idea how I even get up in the morning let alone blunder my way through escaping your Dark Lord time and time again, that I actually have enough Slytherin in me to recognize an extraordinarily risky offer made by you Malfoy – The Slytherin Personified."

Malfoy snorted and genuinely smiled in amusement as he shook his head. "You have about as much Slytherin in you're whole body as I do in my little finger. Less, in fact."

"Tell that to the sorting hat, since I had to fight with it to stay out of Slytherin." Harry stopped at Malfoy's barefaced incredulous start. "You should speak with Pansy about being to quick to label people."

Malfoy growled. "Where do you think she got it from in the first place? That dosey cow doesn't have a single thought of her own. The perfect girlfriend really." He added in realization.

"Is there anyone you know that you have a kind word to say about?" Harry asked grumpily.

Malfoy smirked as he searched Harry's face. Then he grabbed him by the elbow and pushed him forward again. "Come on." They didn't stop again until they reached Harry's dorm room.

"You stay out here."

"I've no desire to see the Weasel blubbing over his mudblood." The Slytherin's lip curled in distaste but it lacked its usual venom. "But get on with it. We've wasted too much time already!"

Harry turned his eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breathe before knocking lightly on the door. He waited a moment but no sound could be heard from within and when he shot a look at Malfoy, the other boy was flicking his head, urging him to go in. Harry sighed and opened the door, stepping into the dimly lit room and closing the door quietly behind him.

Ron was not in bed asleep as he'd imagined, but sitting up at one of the windows, silhouetted by the almost full moon. He didn't turn to face Harry as he crossed the room, though a slight shift in his arms hugging tightly to his knees let Harry know the red head knew he was there.

"Ron..." Harry said quietly and moved until he was as in-front of his best friend as he could get. He gratefully took purchase of the sills opposite edge, perching himself there and trying to calm down his shakes. He leaned forward to try and draw Ron's eyes from the emptiness beyond the window. "She's not dead."

At first Ron didn't react. Maybe he had already closed off to whatever it was that Harry might have been going to say. Harry could understand him not wanting to hear any more damning admissions or explanations, or worse, apologies that only drove Hermione's death home even further. So Harry watched and waited, and when Ron finally turned his head very slowly away from the window and met Harry's gaze, Harry leaned in even further to make sure it got through this time and spoke in a low voice. "She's not dead, Ron. They didn't kill her. Hermione's alive. Snape took her alive."

Ron sat as still as rock for a moment, and then his breathing suddenly became heavy as he continued to stare at Harry. A small sob came from off to the side where Harry's own bed was. He

turned to see Ginny sitting up and watching them silently with silvery streaks glistening down her cheeks. She climbed out of bed and wordlessly walked to Harry, leaning into his chest and letting him embrace her in his arms that trembled as he tried to tighten his grip around her.

"Are-are you..." Harry looked up at Ron's attempted question. "H-how do you know?"

"Smith." Harry said. "Malfoy woke him up and he told us what happened. The Avada curse was meant for him. They wanted Hermione alive."

"Snape took Hermione alive." Ron's voice suddenly changed. He seemed unable to allow himself any real relief over the news and now his face curled in bitter anger. "*Snape*." He said the name like he was spitting poison. Harry could guess the next lot of questions out of his best friend's mouth. Harry was the one who'd had recent dealings with Snape and had even had to trust him with certain things, like helping Malfoy for instance, but Harry did not want to have to sit through the onslaught and accusations right now, when he was feeling just as betrayed and had no answers either.

Ron was opening his mouth to start his rant when the door opened and Malfoy strolled in. Ron's attention was immediately diverted to the blonde and Harry was actually thankful he'd disobeyed Harry's order to stay put.

"You've molly-coddled your followers enough. Let's go."

In his weakened state, Harry almost missed catching hold of Ron in an effort to stop him using Malfoy as a punching bag to de-stress on.

"Malfoy." Harry said wearily as he continued to hold a shaky arm across Ron's chest, barring his way. "I think you should leave."

"Why?" He asked coily. "So you can all talk about me behind my back?" He pouted ridiculously and slipped both of his hands in his pockets, slouching against Harry's bedpost.

"What have they done with her?" Ron bellowed too close to Harry at Malfoy. Harry winced and eased away, wagging a finger in his right ear.

"How should I know Weasel? I've been here at Hogwarts haven't I?" The Slytherin replied lazily.

"Bollocks!" Ron barked. "You and Snape are thick as thieves and he's the one that's got her. You know Malfoy! I know you do." Suddenly Ron lunged forward and fisted the front of Malfoy's jumper, yanking the blonde's face closer to his. "And you're not leaving here until you spill everything you know." Ron threatened.

"Ron, he was just as surprised about Snape as we are. I was there when Smith told him and he even questioned Smith himself what Snape was doing there." Harry interjected calmly.

Ron eyed Malfoy who merely flicked his tightly set jaw up in a move to indicate agreement. The Slytherin still looked calm and composed with his hands still in his pockets, but Harry could see the long line of the boy's wand already in hand under the fabric and the glint of fear and adrenaline in his eyes. He needed to diffuse this situation fast.

"Snape obviously wanted Hermione alive specifically." Harry went on quickly. "It couldn't have been as bait to get to me because I was right there. The whole exercise would have become pointless and they could have taken me there and then but they didn't."

Ron's grip was loosening slightly and Malfoy edged back where he could without seeming like he was.

"There's got to be a reason Snape wants her. And the sooner we figure it out, the sooner we can start looking for her."

At Harry's words, Ron released Malfoy completely and turned his attention on Harry and Ginny. Malfoy adjusted his jumper with one hand and leaned back against the bedpost, his wand hand never leaving the pocket.

"Why *her* though Harry?" Ron asked, a pained expression on his face as he wracked his brain. "How are we ever going to figure out why Snape took her? She's just a school kid. Merlin I wish she were here. Its time like this we need her. She's always been the smart one."

"Exactly." Ginny said tonelessly. They all looked at her and she shrugged, her eyes still red and puffy, flicked between them. "Well, she is. And Snape knows it. Without her, getting in and out of the next stronghold alive will be almost impossible. I mean, you couldn't have got the last Horc—"

Three sets of eyes suddenly widened in shock, while one pair narrowed.

Ginny had only just managed to stop herself from giving away to Malfoy what Harry, Ron and Hermione had been doing for months now. She looked mortified as she clamped a hand over her mouth, but at least she had managed to stop herself in time. But that was now the least of her problems.

Ron's mouth gaped open and Harry turned a furious glare on her after he darted a look at Malfoy. How could she know what they had been doing? She had always been aware that something was going on, but she'd never been privy to the details. Yet somehow, she had just made it known that she was fully in the loop about past happenings, and hang on a minute – how does she know they'll need Hermione to get to the last Horcrux when they have no clue as to what it is – let alone where to find it?

Ginny began to shrink under Harry's piercing glare. They would need to have a talk. *A talk?* They needed more than a little chat to get this all out in the open, but with Malfoy here, and Harry on a mission, now was not the time. Harry could have roared aloud in frustration. What had Ginny been up to?

"H-h-h-how..."

"Not now Ron," Harry cut off the stunned and semi-speechless Ron, still frowning intently. He flicked his head in Malfoy's direction and Ron closed his mouth and swallowed. It was then that Harry noticed Malfoy's demeanour had completely changed. He was no longer slouching and eyeing them all in disinterest; he was standing rigid and intensely eyeing three Gryffindors expressions. But he said nothing.

"Er... Malfoy and I have to... go." Harry trailed off as he began walking to the door.

"Snape would not have gone to Hogsmeade in broad daylight to abduct Granger just because she's the smart one out of you three."

Harry, Ron and Ginny stared at Malfoy blankly. No one had expected him to offer any sort of opinion on the matter, certainly not one that appeared to be trying to be helpful.

Malfoy sighed exaggeratedly. "Think about it. Firstly, if that's all they wanted to do – hinder your progress in whatever it is you're doing – then killing her would take far less planning and manpower – much easier. And why Snape? A high-ranking Death Eater, not to mention one of the most wanted men around. He killed your beloved Dumbledore who, lets face it, has more allies than The Dark Lord has enemies. It's risky for him to show up in Hogsmeade. Very risky."

"So what are you saying?" Harry asked cautiously.

Malfoy shrugged a shoulder. "I'd guess that Snape needed Hermione. For something important. Something worth the risk. And its not you, Potter. Like you said, you were there, they could have taken you – but they didn't. What's she been working on?"

The question was directed at Harry, but Ginny answered.

"No one knows. She's been holed up in her room night after night ever since we got back to Hogwarts. She hasn't told any of us what she was doing."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "If it was me, and I'd just lost my best friend – forgetting the fact that



I'd never have a mudblood as an actual friend, let alone a best one – then I'd be looking to find out what she'd been up to before she disappeared."

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

"I'll check her room." Ginny volunteered. "I'll try tonight, but it might have to be in the morning. Lavender was pretty upset about... well, you know."

"I'm coming with you." Ron said flatly.

"You can't." Ginny said hesitantly. "Boys can't get into—"

"I'll fly." And with that, Ron dug his broom out of his trunk and headed to the door.

"Oh, all right. But I'd better go and warn Lavender. She's likely to hex your ears off if you just go bursting in there. Especially after what's happened."

"I'll see you both later then." Harry said quietly as he opened the door and waited for Malfoy to go through before him.

As the two of them descended the spiral stairs Harry almost felt like he was going into the Gladiators ring. He knew there was going to be confrontation tonight, he'd known it for days, but as the time drew nearer to getting to the memory in the pensieve, an awful dread was gathering, hanging over him like a black thunder cloud.

As they stepped back into the common room, Pansy rushed up to Draco and whispered urgently and Draco swore loudly. A second later his eyes squeezed tightly shut and his right hand gripped his left forearm as he dropped to his knees with a guttural moan.

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